UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

THE VOICES OF YOUNG PEOPLE: BEING HEARD IN OUR HIGH SCHOOLS

BY

ROBERT WILLIAM MCPHEE ©

A thesis
submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
in Educational Administration

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATIONAL POLICY STUDIES

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my Mom and Dad. Together they have encouraged me to attain an education, challenged me to question what I don't understand, and modeled for me the need to make what is wrong, right.

Dad, thanks for the gifts of recognizing and creating the big idea, nurturing my restlessness, and quenching my inquisitiveness.

Mom, thanks for the gifts of making things happen by attending to details, celebrating my need for peacefulness, and making special the times I share with those I love.

Together, your gifts have allowed me to be me.

ABSTRACT

There is a great deal written about high schools from an adult perspective. The Canadian Education Association Report (1995) on Secondary Schools in Canada stated, "the student community is difficult for an adult to penetrate without long study" (p.170). This study is an attempt to penetrate this student community. It is based upon the belief that there is a wealth of knowledge, understandings, and insights to be found in young people experiencing today's high schools.

The participants were 12 young people between the ages of 15 and 19 years. There were six males and six females, all of whom were either attending high school or had graduated in June of 1996. As individuals they had widely different experiences of high school. Through recorded conversations with each participant, the study focused on their responses to three research questions:

- What do high school students value in their school experience?
- What do high school students value in their student-adult relationships?
- What do high school students value in their principal?

These young people indicated a strong liking for and appreciation of their high schools. However, underlying this they spoke of tensions related to academics, relationships, power, adolescence, and influence in their schools. I heard them speak with great admiration for teachers -- teachers who know them, respect them, make time for them, inspire them, hear them, understand them, and share with them. They see their principal as a pivotal person, engaging them while giving them space, challenging them while showing acceptance, and providing both guidance for the future and affirmation of

their present selves. Throughout this study, reflections on my own principalship are connected to insights from the students, literature on the principalship, and fiction.

Overall the study shows the complexity of these young people's lives within the context of their high school and their need to be heard -- not only as a group, but as individuals with personal needs, desires and dreams. They are asking that we take the time to hear their voices, and adjust our practice based on what we learn.

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CHAPTER 1

WONDERING

Talk

During my life I have been blessed with a variety of wonderful opportunities. Often, however, I have gone from one of these to the next without taking the time to truly appreciate the people, the experiences, or the places. My life seemed to be rushing towards new experiences of growth. I had lived my past, and I sought my future.

In the spring of 1996, I left a high school principalship after five memorable years. As the remainder of the year unfolded I became more and more fascinated by how I might bring about a deeper personal meaning to these five years. What had this experience meant to me? While navigating the back trails of the river valley, talking with friends and family, and during quiet times on my own, I found myself wondering -- questions and thoughts so simple, but at the same time so complex and so important. What did it mean to be a high school principal? What difference did I make to the young people in my care? What differences do high schools make to young people?

When I really get to the heart of the matter, I wonder which is more important to me -- what I accomplished or what I did along the way? Somehow a reflection of accomplishments feels like an ending, a relegation of the past truly to the past. What I did along the way, may, just possibly be still having an effect on someone, bringing some new hope from past experience and new energy to the future. (Personal Journal)

For me, the high school principalship had been challenging, multi-dimensional, satisfying, difficult and exhilarating. Principals must be good listeners who readily seek out the opinions, ideas and beliefs of many groups of people. "Listening, that supremely important form of receiving, is essential" (Noddings, 1984, p. 121). Palmer (1983) said, "the humility that enables us to hear the truth of others must stand in creative tension with the faith that empowers us to speak our own" (p. 109). That tension of listening and talking is integral to the high school principalship.

"Elsa Porter put it elegantly: 'Good leadership is an elegant conversation'" (Bolman & Deal, 1994, p. 90) and Noddings (1984) stated, "the purpose of dialogue is to come into contact with ideas and to understand, to meet the other and to care" (p. 186). Gronn (1983) saw school principals as "drifter[s] moving in and out of different locations and areas and in and out of relationships and encounters" (p. 19), who accomplish administration through talk (p. 1). Starratt (1996) outlined the principle behind such talk. He suggested, "what administrators ought to seek are the most reasonable decisions under the circumstances -- decisions for which others can take responsibility for because they have been involved in making them" (p. 5). Finally Sergiovanni (1994) acknowledged that this sharing of responsibility in schools is not a technical skill. Rather, "becoming a community of learners . . . is an adventure not only in learning but an adventure in shared leadership and authentic relationships" (p. 155). Its complexity is perhaps what makes it both difficult and exhilarating.

The talk, the conversation, the dialogue open interesting possibilities and discoveries about ourselves and others. Noddings (1992) said genuine dialogue occurs when "neither party knows at the outset what the outcomes or decision will be" (p. 23). This pushed me to think further about the question, "what difference do high schools make to young people?" Obviously, the response to this question requires genuine dialogue or conversation with young people. Sherman (1996) wrote:

> We know about the purposes of school from an adult perspective. . . . But what about asking the so-called "clients" of the school system, the children? Very little exists that describes the thoughts of children about school and where they fit into it. . . . Whatever school is to us, school can only "belong" to the children if we listen to their perspectives. . . . For too long we have ignored the children's perspective, forging ahead with an attitude that says "adults know best." (pp. i-ii)

These are very powerful statements and challenges to educators. However, as Heidegger (1988) noted, such conversations are not just to gather the perspectives of students. He wrote, "nor is interpretation the acquiring of information about what is understood; it is rather the working-out of possibilities projected in understanding" (p. 221). Heidegger is writing about interpretation and stressing the importance of going beyond acquiring information. For him, interpretation is required in order to work out the possibilities. To come to a recognition of such possibilities requires us, then, to converse with those for whom schools have been created. Unless we do so we risk severely limiting the understandings that could arise through this discourse (Sherman, 1996, p. 76) -- discourse that truly connects us to each other and to the world within which we live.

The questions

I chose three questions to begin this search for possibilities.

What do high school students value in their school experience?
What do high school students value in their student-adult relationships?
What do high school students value in their principal?

Would the possibilities unfolded through these questions help me better understand what is important for students? Would sharing conversations based on the questions help others, give them strength, or encouragement to lead as they truly want to? Would young people be valued by my asking the questions? These were my hopes.

Why was I asking high school students to respond to these questions in the first place? Cooper (1997) queried, "where is the researcher in the process and what is her or his intent in doing the research?" (p. 31). I begin my response by confirming that I am an educator. I believe in young people and I know that personally I can influence their lives. Mostly, however, I am asking these questions because I believe there is a wealth of knowledge, understandings and perceptions to be found in young people who have or are experiencing school -- young people whose ideas and insights are essential in making our schools truly exceptional places of learning.

Schools: Whose reality?

I am quite intrigued by high schools. The Canadian Education Association Report (1995) stated

> THE QUALITY OF THE SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT for students stands out in these case studies as the most frequently mentioned reason for a school being "exemplary." Praise for schools is often praise for the way students behave and are treated. A successful school is one that feels like a home, a place where all feel equal and safe, and where teachers care. (p. 138)

While this description highlights order and courtesy, Starratt (1996) recognized the incredible complexity of the community of "school" when he said

> I am not imagining a sugar-coated, utopian reality. I am speaking, rather, of attempting to build an environment where the pulls and tugs between these two instincts [individual self-survival and connectedness, the attraction to loving relationships] provide the very stuff of the social learning agenda, an environment that is noisy, conflicted, filled with ambiguity, muddied by the traditional vices of anger, lust, envy, contentiousness, and greed, and yet an environment that encourages trust, openness, loyalty, integrity, generosity, courage, and love. (p. 96)

Within this complex social environment, there are many individuals and in particular many large and small groups of young people. I have often wondered what their understandings of school are, and if I as an adult and an educator have any real clue about them.

Very gently, Van Manen (1986) reminded me that, "no matter how well-meaning many of us are as pedagogues, our words and actions may address themselves to a situation the child is not part of" (p. 9). He then went on to say we must "do our utmost to understand what it is like to be in a world as a child" (p. 13). Starratt (1996) also argued "that schools are made up primarily of students and should take their reality into account first and foremost" (p. 72). Foster (1996) posed the problem for all principals with his succinct questions, "If I were in their places, how would I feel? What would I want done differently?" (p. xii). I hope this study will help me answer his challenge.

Certainly, we have come a long way from the days when, "as in schools for children, those who must be impressed are not the actual inmates, but those who pay the bills" (Atwood, 1996, p. 413). However, I continue to wonder how different the realities of young people in schools are from mine. Cooper (1997) suggested, "children's realities are often storied as being so different from adults' that adults may be surprised when they discover that the experiences faced by both children and adults are more similar than different" (p. 101). How will we ever know, unless we adults begin conversation with young people?

Returning to the Canadian Education Association Report (1996), I was forcefully made to stop and consider how I might understand young peoples' realities. The report stated,

> the student community is difficult for an adult to penetrate without long study. Researchers find that adult perceptions of students are easier to document than the perceptions of students themselves. But these adult perceptions may be untrustworthy, because adults in schools are caught up in their work -- teaching lessons, marking papers, attending committee meetings -- and so they do not find time to sit down with students to simply talk. (p. 170)

It seems that sitting down and talking is essential. A sharing of stories is needed -- listening to young peoples' stories and sharing my own.

My story

Each of us who has been or is a high school principal has stories to tell. It is through them that we understand, at least partially, the complexities of school life. We individually find meaning in our experiences through these stories we accumulate on the journey (Coles, 1990, p. 30). But it is through their sharing that our passion, our sense of wonder and our openness to others is revealed.

I will tell one of my stories. It has significance to me -- perhaps because it confirms for me how important relationships are in my story. I also share it because, as Kirby and McKenna (1989) wrote, " we must invest part of ourselves in the process of creating new information. We are an ingredient of our own research" (p. 7). My stories are key ingredients in this study.

> It was September 2, 1992 and I really felt like I was ready. My first assembly with our new students was at 9:30 a.m. I felt a tinge of anxiousness, but then reclaimed my confidence. This morning's presentation would be a bringing together of the past year's efforts.
>
> Almost a year earlier I had started the process of asking questions -- questions to students, staff, parents and community members. I thought they were good questions -- what are the important things you look for when choosing a high school, what do you want the high school your son or daughter attends to emphasize, and what do you expect a high school to provide for a young person who is important to you? We had taken all the responses and created an almost new school.
>
> This morning, was my first opportunity to speak, as their principal, to the young people who had chosen to be part of this venture.
>
> It started off well. I played some music as they all came into the drama room -- they seemed to have that same cautious, questioning air about them that I too felt. As I looked out over the crowd it really hit me that, other than a few kids, I didn't know any of them!
>
> I welcomed them and shared the meanings behind our school colors and our school mascot. I wondered if they might think it was a bit corny, but then I thought -- this is the kind of thing on which traditions are based! This was followed by the introduction of key members of staff who were there to help them.
>
> Remembering what I had heard through all my earlier questioning, I shared our commitment to them -- to ensure personal excellence, to make learning exciting and relevant, and to provide opportunities for the development of new friends and relationships.
>
> From there I went on to our Code of Ethics -- those things we did together in this community, this family of ours. Starting on a positive note I spoke of attendance

> and participation; moved on to personal goal setting, the help and support available to them, and clubs and athletics; and finished off with the bottom line issues of drugs, alcohol, fighting and harassment. I even did a real hands-on demonstration about vandalism, showing the costs of items I was sure they wanted in the school, and pointing out that we could purchase these if we didn't have to spend money as a result of vandalism.
>
> The group was really attentive and seemed to be absorbing everything I was saying. Or were they completely missing or ignoring everything? I wasn't sure. I found the crowd really hard to read.
>
> I went on to talk about how important their active involvement in "their" school was to them feeling comfortable in high school. I shared my excitement at the renovation work that would be beginning soon, and which we would all have to work around. This was an adventure of which we could all be part.
>
> My conclusion was upbeat and I hoped personalized. I shared with them that we thought each of them was exceptional and that it was our goal to challenge and help each of them achieve great things, be successful, and be happy. I thanked them, and as they politely left, I played another piece of music.
>
> It had gone all right, . . . I thought. How would I ever know? Wasn't their attentiveness, their politeness, a positive indication? I had hoped so.
>
> I straightened up my overheads in anticipation of my next assembly, with another group of students, the next day.

Reflecting on this event now, I'm struck by how much I had to say and how little they talked. At the time, my over-riding feeling was how little I knew them and how much I wanted to connect to them. Their polite compliance gave few clues to their personalities, as real people with feelings and emotions. I knew I wanted to get to know them better.

The stories of young people

Simply by asking young people questions about high school, I am sharing my assumption that high schools, adults in schools, and particularly principals are of value to students; and that students would share stories about their assumptions and understandings. That is an important start. Secondly I wonder if by reflecting on the questions, and listening to the responses, other principals might have the opportunity to grow and learn as well. Gaining some personal wisdom is important, providing that same opportunity for others would add greatly to the worthiness of the search.

It is time to talk, to engage in conversation with a group of young people, in order to gain glimpses into their realities. These conversations require listening and valuing those with whom I am engaged. Yet even as the stories they tell are recorded on tape they will change -- story telling almost always blends the memories of yesterday and the aspirations of tomorrow, with the realities of today. MacLeod (1986) spoke of this in a reflection on Christmas:

> My family had been there for a long, long time and so it seemed had I. And much of that time seems like the proverbial yesterday. Yet when I speak on this Christmas 1977, I am not sure how much I speak with the voice of that time or how much in the voice of what I have since become. And I am not sure how many liberties I may be taking with the boy I think I was. For Christmas is a time of both past and present and often the two are imperfectly blended. As we step into its nowness we often look behind. (p. 61).

Much of what we say or express on any issue important to us is certainly a blending of the past and present, and undoubtedly includes glimpses of the future as well. Our oral stories change further as they are turned into print. Martinez (1996) wrote, "I didn't know that the syntax or the tones of voice of the characters return with a different air about them and that, as they pass through the sieves of written language, they become something else" (p. 73). Thus my challenge is to be as true as possible to the story tellers and the stories, realizing that the story tellers change from moment to moment, and the stories are transformed as they move from oral to written language.

Earlier I used Elsa Parker's reference to leadership as an "elegant conversation." This, too, is what I wished this study to be. Conversations that required listening and valuing those I talked with. I heard the call from many sources to listen for the story. I tried to do this. I formed my questions and positioned my body in ways that showed I was the learner, so that those I conversed with would be comfortable in telling their stories. I kept my research questions as my compass points and tried not to veer too far astray, while at the same time letting the flow of the conversations be led by what was of value to each young person.

Merton (1979) wrote

> the purpose of education is to show a person how to define himself [herself] authentically and spontaneously in relation to his [her] world -- not to impose a prefabricated definition of the world, still less an arbitrary definition of the individual himself [herself]. (p. 12)

My hope is, that as a result of this work, we will be one step closer to enabling all young people to define themselves and someday be able to make statements like this one made by a grade 12 student in 1996:

> As a result of my high school experience I have become more independent, more outgoing, and I am more confident with myself and my abilities. I have been treated with respect and I have earned a lot of responsibility. Most importantly, I am happy with who I have become.

CHAPTER 2

GATHERING AND CREATING

Starting a conversation

Many of my conversations with the young people in this study began with me showing them one or two doctoral theses. The reactions of the young people to these big, bound volumes were delightful in their combination of both wonder and personal experience. Generally, they reacted with, "Wow, I could never do that!" Often they would compare it to an English assignment they had done and a few talked of research they were presently doing which they had been told would "prepare them for university." Probably the most consistent message I heard was that they were glad I was writing this thesis, not they!

Each of the young people felt a sense of being honored as well -- an honoring that something they said or did would become part of a real book. There was a sense of awe that they would be included in research that would end up bound and read by others. It reminded me of my days in an elementary school when we established a publishing house. This was a place where student work was made into books -- a place where a piece of their personal work was transformed into a volume that would certainly be read by others, and that might end up in the school's permanent library collection. Publishing was a way of valuing a student's contribution and saying that others wanted to read what had been written. Discussing these theses was a great way to get our conversations going and to remind us of the importance of the conversation we were having.

Often, too, these young people would ask, "So, Mr. McPhee, how are you going to write your thesis?" Inside me, I heard two different voices. One said, "I really don't have a clue!" The other said, "You know, it's so important to me that others hear what you have to say. I know it will be hard work, but it will be worthwhile because together we can possibly make high schools better places for young people like you." It was the latter voice that was shared with these young people.

The commitment

What was I committing myself to? That was the first big hurdle to overcome. I found it helpful to go back to what I believe is the difference between leadership and management. "In the words of both Peter Drucker and Warren Bennis, 'Management is doing things right; leadership is doing the right things'" (Covey, 1989, p. 101). In this research, the right thing was a commitment to these young people and their world views. It came from the heart through believing in young people. It had a purpose and philosophy which guided my writing about the messy business of experiences that students shared in their conversations with me. The commitment and ultimately the signature voice in this research is mine, but the emphasis has been placed on the voices of the participants.

The question

This commitment then determined the research questions -- questions which went through many drafts and resulted in much dialogue with others, before I settled on them. The three questions, that focused this research are:

> What do high school students value in their school experience?
> What do high school students value in their student-adult relationships?
> What do high school students value in their principal?

To clarify a position from which I could work, I wrote a paper in November 1996 called "Methodology: The Assumptions." This was the result of a lot of reading, exciting dialogue, and much personal thinking. I didn't want to bind myself to anything too specific, but I did need to articulate my assumptions. In this I was following Van Manen (1990) who defined methodology as

> the philosophic framework, the fundamental assumptions, the characteristics of the human science perspective. It includes the general orientation to life, the view of knowledge, and the sense of what it means to be human. (p. 27)

It is critical that what we do is consistent with who we are. Much of who we are is embedded in our questions for research and how we pursue them. That which we wonder, ponder, or question as we reflect on practice and on life represents the "who" in each of us. Our methodology, too, needs to be consistent with who we are and what questions we are asking.

From the heart

Howard (1994) stated, "Human science research is conducted from the heart. It lives and breathes its questioner in ways we do not always understand" (p. ii). At the heart of this study are my beliefs in young people and my experiences as a high school principal. These experiences, as Cooper (1997) suggested, formed the basis for my exploration as "narrative inquiry often begins with an account of a personal experience" (p. 12). This research was stimulated by my personal memories and my desire to understand how that experience informed and is shaped by my vision for the future; but even more by my desire to better understand both what high school means to young people and how it is experienced by them. I believe this understanding will help me be a better principal.

Believing in teenagers

I believe that teenagers have valuable and worthwhile insights about themselves and about their schools. More than this perhaps, it is important to see how they understand themselves in the context of high school. This may be what shapes what they do, how they participate, and ultimately their futures. It leads us to want to know more about that which we don't know about them. Teenagers have been the major source of the stories in this research. It has been important for me to model for myself and others who wish to learn, the importance of developing real partnerships with young people. I appreciated Steier's (1991) comments:

> Our reflexivity thus reveals itself as an awareness of the recognition that we allow ourselves to hear what our subjects are telling us, not by imposing our categories on them, but by trying to see how our categories may not fit. (pp. 7-8)

I have had fine conversation and have felt a sense of equality with the young people involved in this study. There has been a two-way flow of ideas and I believe mutual respect for what was shared. It is my hope that both the participants of this research and those who read it will come away with an increased understanding of the value of communicating with young people. For the participants, perhaps the feeling of being valued and the gift of paying attention to them will help them further value others -- particularly those younger than them.

I have tried to keep in mind Lather's (1986) message that, "researchers are not so much owners of data as they are 'majority shareholders' who must justify decisions and give participants a public forum for critique" (p. 264). Not only have I received stories and insights from young people, but together we have reflected on what they have said and what I have written. We have worked towards a sense of reciprocity, or "a mutual negotiation of meaning and power" (Lather, 1986, p. 263).

Purpose, philosophy and writing

I found Van Manen (1990) a fine starting point from which to look at humanistic research from both a philosophic and a practical perspective. He consistently reminded me to ensure issues of pedagogy were central to my study, and helped me realize that, "to do research is always to question the way we experience the world" (p. 5). Both Leonard (1994) and Plager (1994) caused me to consider similar issues. Leonard steered me from being too focused on the "best methods" for my questions, and instead caused me to consider this study in the larger context of "what it means to be a person" (p. 44). Similarly Plager began her article with "the question asked and the self-understanding held are crucial issues in how a research project is approached" (p. 65). Carr (1986) focused me on the temporal nature of research, and the interconnectedness of the past, present and future in all work we do (p. 60), while Clandinin and Connelly (1994) caused me to ponder the distinctions between the stories people live and tell, and those which the narrative researcher collects and writes (p. 416). Coles (1990) stressed the importance of stories themselves becoming our discovery, but reminded me that "what you are hearing is to some considerable extent a function of *you*" (p. 15). Finally, Heidegger, whose works and writings many of the above writers referred to, provided me a freeing perspective when he wrote that human science "must necessarily be inexact just in order to remain rigorous" (1977, p. 120).

Messy business

Clandinin and Connelly (1994) said "experience is messy, and so is experiential research" (p. 417). I have not tried to stick to a single method or technique in this research. I have done what made the most sense at each step along the way, keeping in mind my questions and what was important to me. This was reinforced by Cooper (1997) who wrote:

> I believe that strict adherence to a single method does not allow the researcher to consider the taken-for-granted assumptions that underline her project, the scrutiny of which may lead to the development of a deeper and more meaningful research account. (p. 71)

Above all, I was in the pursuit of knowledge designed to bring a deeper understanding to both my own and the experiences of others -- through studying and interpreting the everyday lives of young people in schools. I haven't generalized this research beyond the particular situations studied, but I hope that parts of what I have studied will be typical of other situations, and thus of value to other educators.

Conversations

Stories have been the basis of this pursuit of knowledge. I chose very informal, open-ended conversations with young people as the way of hearing these stories. Clandinin and Connelly (1994, p. 422) suggested greater equality among participants may occur if a less structured conversation, rather than an interview, is used. Greater insights and more useful information are likely to result. Coles (1990) quoted Dr. Ludwig who suggested, "Why don't you chuck the word 'interview,' call yourself a friend, call your exchanges 'conversations'!" (p. 32). Conversations, genuine exchanges of ideas, were the basis of my data collection.

Who's talking?

There is no question the ownership of this research is mine. However, it is important that the voice of the young people who participated be heard, and as well be the focus. The issue of "voice" or "ownership" presents a unique challenge in research. I fall back on the caution expressed by Clandinin and Connelly (1994) who discussed

> the dilemma of how lively our signature should be: Too vivid a signature runs the risk of obscuring the field and its participants; too subtle a signature runs the risk of deception that the research speaks from the point of view of the participant. (p. 424)

I tried to steer a middle ground; giving just place to my participants but including my voice and the voices of other writers.

Recognizing the Creation as Research

If this creation were to be viewed as research it needed to embrace a number of conventions. It expanded beyond the 12 young people and me, to include other data sources -- sources about high schools, leadership, child-adult relationships, and reflective practice. Throughout I have been cautious that these sources did not overpower the voices of the 12 young people. Further sources assisted me in establishing critical boundaries related to the ethics and overall trustworthiness of research. The style of writing needed to represent effectively both the messages of the young people and life in high schools. Overriding all of this was a cautious hope that this research would be greeted with friendliness.

Expanding the conversation: Other data sources

I have done a lot of reading related to this research. I read about high schools, about leadership, about child-adult relationships, and about reflective practice. I read fiction and non-fiction. I was looking for ideas and thoughts that would reinforce what I was hearing in conversation, and passages that would challenge everything I knew.

Learning from story

Often we feel a sense of community, a sense of acceptance, and a sense of relationship when we hear someone share an experience that is familiar to us. On the other hand, we often doubt our own feelings or actions because we feel alone or not understood. I believe that fiction, as well as non-fiction, can be used to challenge, confirm, and enrich our life stories. Perhaps because fiction, by its very nature, is expected to be more real, broader and less sanitized -- more like everyday life. As a result, I have included some of these stories where they have both extended and challenged the stories told by the young people who participated in this research. Here are highlights from some of the literature that have influenced my thinking. While I gained a great deal from these, I found them to be virtually all written by adults, relating realities as understood by adults. Young people were referred to as the sources of some data and ideas, however, nothing I found spoke primarily from their understandings of themselves or their interactions with others in high schools.

High schools

The Canadian Education Association Report (1995) and the National Association of Secondary School Principals Report (1996) provided both Canadian and American perspectives of what our high schools are and might be. It was interesting that in this day of technology and science, the underlying finding in both reports was the importance of students being actively engaged in their schooling; feeling a sense of community; and the need for educators to understand what students want, value and seek. Both were useful perspectives of high school; both, however, were perspectives that were adult, rather than student, based. Davis'(1995) exploration into the work of an effective high school principal provided useful insights into the day-to-day complexities of life in a large Canadian urban high school. While she included perspectives of students, the study generally focused on their perceptions and those of various other groups or individuals, of one very effective high school principal.

Dryden (1995) took an inside look at a Canadian high school, and while providing many generalized perspectives on high schools, I found his work focusing on individual young people the most helpful. The stories of individual young people powerfully showed what is and is not working in our high schools. He effectively told of the lives of several young people, and then presented a futuristic view of a high school in the year 2003. The almost futile story of both a student and a teacher struggling for recognition portrayed by Avi (1991) showed how badly things can go wrong when the time and effort is not taken to develop both community and an understanding of individuals in high schools. Both the student and teacher fell victim to this lack of understanding. Sizer (1992) showed how a group of concerned educators could work to align a high school with what they knew about student needs, achievement and growth.

Leadership

Sergiovanni (1994) wrote, "Principals and teachers together are followers of the dream, committed to making it real. And leadership is nothing more than a means to make things happen" (p. 170). A number of writers have similarly considered leadership in the context of that which serves, defines values and engages others in both leading and learning. Stewardship is key to leadership in Block (1993). He defined stewardship "as the willingness to be accountable for the well-being of the larger organization by operating in service, rather than in control, of those around us" (p. xx). Further, he added, "It is accountability without control or compliance" (p. xx). Greenleaf (1991) saw leadership in the context of service and servanthood. Extending this leadership beyond organizations, he stated:

> If a better society is to be built, one that is more just and more loving, one that provides greater creative opportunity for its people, then the most open course is to *raise both the capacity to serve and the very performance as servant* of existing major institutions by new regenerative forces operating within them. (p. 49)

Within his statement I hear a powerful message to leaders in one of these "major institutions" -- schools. From a somewhat different perspective, Secretan (1996) spoke of making decisions based on different values, and challenged us to determine if our decisions as leaders are based on instructions and advice from our personality (material values) or our soul (spiritual values)" (p. 26). Finally I appreciated Starratt's (1996) challenge to administrators to "employ imagination in devising creative ways to honor all students" (p. 153). His challenge brings all these perspectives on leadership back to a point of focus for principals -- that being the students to whom and for whom we are accountable.

Child-adult relationships

I gained a number of insights into what makes up the relationships children have with adults. Purkey and Novak (1984) set a useful frame for this by sharing, "humans need invitations the way flowers need sunshine" (p. 10). It seems that in child-adult relationships, if invitations are going to be made, they will come from the adult. Noddings (1984, 1992) very insightfully looked at this relationship. Her (1984) distinction between "caring for" which "requires engrossment, commitment, displacement of motivation," and "caring about" which "involves a certain benign neglect," powerfully showed the need for real engagement between children and adults (p. 112). Bollnow (1989) provided a number of insights into the relationships between children and adults in schools. Especially helpful to me was his reference to serenity, or "that inner equilibrium that brings about a sense of happy fulfillment for the human being" (p. 53). Serenity is perhaps what makes adults potentially most different from children, and also what allows them to invite the relationship with a child.

The relationships between children and adults was portrayed well in many pieces of fiction. The ongoing and very influential relationship between Candide and Dr. Pangloss was vividly shown by Voltaire (1758), particularly in Candide's clear ability to recognize someone who "had not been brought up by Dr. Pangloss" (p. 41). Camus (1995) portrayed the powerful influence of teachers on the childhood of a poor, fatherless boy growing up in Algeria. A teacher changed "the destiny of this child in his charge," (p. 137) by recognizing that he could make a difference. The relationships between educators and students, which lasted a life time, were represented by Davies (1994). The impact of school was shown in relationships that intertwined over a period of many years. Dickens (1854) forced us to see a very different reality of life and learning by pointing out the ramifications of lives which don't include feelings and nurturing as the basis for relationships. The wisdom of age and the excitement of youth, blending and influencing each other, were shown in Carrier (1991), Dahl (1975), and Williams (1984). Carrier and Dahl reflected on the mysteries of adults and their worlds, from the perspectives of their child-characters; Williams reflected more on youth from a vantage point of maturity. McLean (1996) brought together a diverse collection of Canadian stories that focused on childhood and relationships, which led me to a number of other stories. I used these and other writers' stories and insights to reflect upon the comments of the young people involved in this study.

Reflective practice

In many ways I see my entire research as a form of reflective practice; a personal, ongoing process that I am consciously taking part in. Schon (1983, 1987) presented the need for constant daily reflecting, and thinking about what we are doing in the midst of our actions. Principals take part in reflective practice to facilitate personal and professional development, to ensure their administration is a moral practice, to lead and learn as models for students, to embrace the daily paradoxes of administrative practices, and to make practice a form of active research (Barth, 1990; Hodgkinson, 1991; Sergiovanni, 1995; Starratt, 1996). I found Starratt (1996) perhaps most consistently brought the reflection on educational administration back to the needs of students in our schools. The work of the principal is ever changing, and with this comes our growing need to grow as we work as we change. Hodgkinson (1991) referred to this "conscious practice of administration" as praxis (p. 111).

I enjoyed a number of pieces that looked reflectively at the work of principals. Challenging paradoxes are daily occurrences according to Deal and Peterson (1994).

"Our schools need people who can embrace and blend both the technical and symbolic sides of their role with confidence and enthusiasm, skill and insight" (Deal & Peterson, 1994, p. xiv). Ackerman, Donaldson and Van der Bogart (1996) approached these paradoxes from the perspective of the "persisting tensions" (p. 6) found in the day-to-day work of principals. They saw principals as "sense makers" (p. 1), and considered a number of tensions that challenge them to "do *both-and* rather than *either-or*" (p. 8). Their examples included tensions and values related to issues of justice, purpose, change and autonomy (pp. 7, 158). Most of these were human tensions, where the individual needs of young people or adults were posed against the collective needs of groups.

A caution

The child wondered as he heard the teacher's question. Why is she asking me that question? Doesn't she already know the answer? Does my answer really matter? Will it change her mind? Before answering, he cautiously formed his words to uncover very little of his true feeling. "I won't risk unless I know I am valued," a voice said deep down inside of him. Unknown to him, he was deciding not to learn. (Personal Journal)

I cautioned myself very early in the process to make sure that I always made room for what the young people I was talking to had to say. The reading I have done was written by adults. It is valuable and has helped me with my own reflection. It is, however, the voices of young people on which my research questions are focused. Part of my hesitation related to the fact that we can learn not only from what is said, but also from what is not said. Coles (1990) reinforced this when he wrote, "Dr. Ludwig wanted me to worry about messages omitted, yarns gone untold, details brushed aside altogether, in the rush to come to a conclusion" (p. 21). There is meaning, there is wisdom, and there are possibilities to be gleaned from a variety of verbal and nonverbal sources. I have worked to intermingle my own experiences and the literature I have read, with the insights of the young people with whom I have had conversations. Agger (1991) referred to others view of Foucault as "a theoretical 'amateur'" (p. 126), as related to Foucault's need to position himself "outside of disciplinary mainstreams so that he [could] gain a useful vantage on them" (p. 126). It was that amateur perspective I wanted. If I were going to get genuine data and information from young people, I needed to be an amateur at heart. Every story, every piece of data, and every source had to be valued.

Setting boundaries

The ethics of research

Ethical considerations have been key in this research. It has been based on the premise that the protection of dignity and the welfare of participants is vital to good research. I worked with each participant to make them fully aware and informed about the research. Consents were used and completed by all participants (and parents for those under 18 years old). The anonymity of participants has been guarded and all information has been treated with complete confidentiality. If at any time either anonymity or confidentiality seemed impossible, I worked with individual participants to resolve issues to their liking. At the beginning all participants had information about the purpose of research, the research questions, and their rights and responsibilities. I am aware that my past relationship with these young people placed me in a unique research situation. However, I believe that what was gained by knowing the participants was far greater than the risks that might have occurred because of this. It did not seem to be an issue with either the participants or their parents.

Trustworthiness

Various researchers have written about the trustworthiness of research from a number of perspectives. Rudestam and Newton (1992) very generally stated that "good research is always taxing in some ways" (p. 39). Glesne and Peshkin (1992) made a number of points about trustworthiness. They spoke of time and wrote, "Time at your research site, time spent interviewing, time to build sound relationships with respondents -- all contribute to trustworthy data" (p. 146). They went on to discuss the need to be alert to our "own biases" and our "own subjectivity;" to use "the invaluable assistance of others;" to "share the interpretive process with research respondents;" and to realize the "limitations of your study" (pp. 146-47). Van Manen (1990) pointed out the need for both subjectivity and objectivity in human research. He saw objectivity as the researcher being "*oriented* to the object, which stands in front of him or her," while subjectivity is one's need to "be as perceptive, insightful, and discerning as one can be" (p. 20). He wrote, "In human sciences, objectivity and subjectivity are not mutually exclusive categories" (p. 21). Finally, Merriam (1988) proposed more specific terminology and wrote, "Lincoln and Guba (1985), for example, propose using terms ***truth value*** for internal validity, *transferability* for external validity, and *consistency* for reliability" (p. 166).

I feel quite confident that the findings of this research can be trusted and that the process of research has been trustworthy. Whether any or all of the thoughts in the preceding paragraph fit this work specifically, or are completely relevant, I am not sure. I had multiple conversations and reviewed the transcripts with participants to ensure they felt they had described and explained situations as they wished; I involved colleagues in the interpreting of data so that I could guard against my own biases and enrich my own understanding; I openly shared my passions and biases at the outset with participants, my advisor, and myself through oral discussions and writing; and I involved participants in accuracy checks and interpretation of the data throughout the process. A wide range of data sources were used and a good audit trail was established through the conversation tapes, transcripts, references, copies of various edits of work, and records of participants. A fellow researcher did an audit review of a sample of materials. While all my conversations with the 12 young people had a similar general format, they certainly were not all consistent. Too rigorous attachment to a set of standard questions would have defeated the purpose of the study and made it very researcher, rather than participant, oriented.

Transferability is not the major purpose of the research as it is the responsibility of the reader. However, to aid in its use I have provided clear information about methods used, selected participants that saw the world from a variety of perspectives, and made linkages between the lived experiences I uncovered, and what was in literature. In particular, I have tried to ensure that the voices of participants and sufficient contextual data are available for readers to be able to judge its similarity to their own contexts.

Style

I have been intrigued by the style and presentation used by a number of writers. Each challenged me to create my presentation so that it complemented, or became, the story or the message. Martinez (1996) wrote, "Little by little Evita began to turn into a story that, before it ended, kindled another" (p. 13). I thought this spoke nicely of my conversations with the young people, and how these conversations needed to be represented in my presentation. While reading Shields (1993) and Atwood (1996), I continually had the feeling that the way they presented their content, was pulling me into the story as much as the actual content. Lewis (1959) presented the lives of five families in Mexico. His presentation caused me to ponder both the role of the researcher, and how I might share the lives of these young people in a way that others might feel the same sense of closeness I felt to Lewis' families. I used Avi (1991) as a model for a section on feedback to teachers. I felt he presented life in a high school almost more through his style of presentation, than in the realness of his content. Finally Bly's (1996) use of stories followed by her commentary gave me a model from which I could work.

Joseph stood before the Board of Trustees and a large public audience and explained in very technical physics and chemistry terminology, the basis of his Science Fair projects that had led him to national and international acclaim over the past two years. The 17 year old then changed his tack, and in simple, everyday language gave each member of the audience a clear understanding of what he had done. The simplicity of this explanation bought everyone into the realm of science and pointed out his ability, involving everyone in an explanation of a phenomenon many had never thought about before. (Personal Journal)

Language use is important. Mickelson (1995) said, "I want my letters to you to be readable and I want our stories to be accessible" (p. 31). Her desires are also mine. I hope that this text is easy to read; that I have used thoughtful and engaging language; and that the stories and experiences I described meaningfully address the research questions. Stories, naturally and passionately shared in everyday language, are the basis of this research.

Cautious hope

Near the end of their book *Teachers' Professional Knowledge Landscapes*, Clandinin and Connelly (1995) wrote, "We believe that this book offers hope for both teachers and reformers by naming the qualities of the landscape" (p. 163). I, too, desire that this study will offer hope, in this case to principals and those interested in high schools, but I wonder what the qualities of the "landscape" are for principals. Is it friendly to the type of reflective practice my research has undertaken? Is it friendly to the messages of these young people?

Engaging in the process

The challenge was exciting, to engage in a process which would reflect both my beliefs and the wisdom I gained from others. From my first contact with the 12 young people, to our conversations, to the sorting of data, and to the final check with the young people, I worked to keep the process open and real. My constant questioning about what I was doing and how I best use the data kept me both challenged and humbled.

The young people

I struggled with who should be involved as the research participants. I liked Evans' (1989) reference to his participants as, "the principals in this study are neither typical nor atypical, neither representative or un-representative. They simply are" (p. 49). I will say the same thing about the young people in this study. They were and are valued simply because they were approached and they agreed to participate.

The participants are 12 young people between the ages of 15 and 19 years. There were six males and six females, all of whom were either attending high school or had graduated in June of 1996. One was 19 years old, six were 18 years old, three were 17 years old and two were 15 years old. During the 1996-97 school year three of them were attending university, one was attending a community college, one was working part-time, and seven were attending high school. During the study one of the young people dropped out of high school but remained part of the study.

These young people had attended seven high schools, experienced nine high school principals, and a large number of teachers and adults in schools. I had known all them prior to this work and all but one had had me as a principal for at least a portion of their high school experience. As a result of knowing many young people, I was able to choose those who had had widely different experiences of high school. However, I do not claim that what they have shared with me can or should be generalized to a greater population. Certainly, I believe they are representative of others, but that will be up to the reader to determine.

First contact

My first contact with each of the young people was by telephone. No one I contacted turned me down. In fact after they got over the surprise of my call, they were excited and flattered to take part. I arranged to meet or talk further by telephone with each of them about the research. We met in coffee shops, living rooms, school rooms and at front doors. With each of them I reviewed a letter (see Appendix A) outlining the project which emphasized their voluntary participation and that they could withdraw at any point if necessary; that all information provided would be considered confidential and the source would be anonymous; the need for signed consent forms (see Appendix B); a general overview of how our conversations would happen; and that the conversation transcripts would be typed up confidentially by someone else. We finished by setting a time for the first of two recorded conversations, and a request that they each write a brief description of themselves as high school students. They were nervous -- so was I!

Our first conversation

These were all recorded -- with two recorders, just in case there were technical difficulties! We held these conversations around kitchen tables, in a student services office, in family rooms, in living rooms, and in my university office. They were all individual conversations with me, with one exception -- one young person arrived with a friend and we decided to include the friend in our conversation. It worked out very well.

Our conversations all flowed from four general questions (see Appendix C). I asked them to tell me stories they tell their parents, a friend, or a brother or sister about:

-the important or valuable things about their high school

-the adults who made a difference and were important to them in high school

-their high school principal

-the differences between adults in and out of school

These conversations lasted from 45 to 80 minutes and while they all in some way were a response to the questions above, they were very, very different conversations. At the conclusion I thanked them and let them know that once the transcripts were prepared, I would contact them for our second conversation.

Between chats

Seldom was I seen in the weight room, on the running trails, or driving my car without the sounds of these young people's voices coming out of the speakers of a tape deck or the headphones of my walkman. I couldn't believe, on second or third listening how much I had either missed or skipped over during the original conversations. Mostly, I was pleased with the naturalness of the conversations, and the fact that they were getting better as I had more experience. The transcripts were typed up during this period. Once I had these, I reviewed them against the original tapes, noted what I had missed, and prepared for the second set of conversations.

Conversation two

After contacting the young people to set up our second conversations, I gave participants their transcript and a written guide (see Appendix D) for the conversation. I was impressed with the care and preparation shown by these people prior to our second conversations. The written guide reminded them that the transcript was a record of spoken language and that it was the ideas that were important, not how good it looked in print. We had all been surprised to see our talk in print! The guide also reviewed that the transcript was confidential and that their name would not be attached to anything written in this research.

These conversations all followed a similar pattern and lasted about 30 minutes. First, I had asked them to read over the transcript to ensure that they thought it was accurate. I told them to be free to write on these and that I'd take them after the conversation. The next portion of the conversation was quite specific as I focused on questions or issues that I had identified from our first conversation and had asked them to think about before coming to this conversation. Often what I got here were more in-depth stories showing greater feelings, passion and personality. We finished the conversations by doing two things. I asked them to help me determine the really important messages they wanted me to hear by identifying the three most important things they had told me in our two conversations. Finally each shared the imaginary name they would like me to use, when referring to them. The names I have used were their choices -- they enjoyed the chance to rename themselves!

Lots of data

I had a wonderfully rich collection of recorded and written data after these two conversations, and an interesting range of resources from both literature and from my personal files and experiences. I continued listening to the tapes and reviewing the transcripts of the conversations. Throughout the process, I made a conscientious effort to always first go back to the tapes and transcripts -- the voices of the 12 young people -- and then consider the others resources in relation to these messages. This was important, because it was the issues of the young people to which I wanted to direct my analysis.

My first attempt at bringing order to the data was to determine which parts of each transcript related most directly to each of the three research questions. I marked up the transcripts according to the question most directly being discussed. Certainly there was overlap, but this helped break down each transcript into workable pieces. As I was doing this, I continued to read a range of fiction and non-fiction and every source was documented. On cards I highlighted quotations that I thought might have relevance to the messages of the young people.

Chapter 3 focuses on the question, “What do high school students value in their school experience?” It is presented as a sequence of the 12 young people talking about what is important to them. My hope is that the personality of each of them comes through. I began by reviewing both the transcripts and the tapes several times and looking for key messages which would both highlight the individual person and show what that person valued. The presentation shows some of my questions, and highlights of their responses. I have used entirely their own words, and have changed their messages only through deletion of some oral expressions which got in the way of meaning when seen in print, adding appropriate joining words to bring ideas together, and by re-ordering some ideas. Much of this was done as a result of bringing together messages from two separate conversations with each young person. The young people reviewed and were part of the discussion of what is presented in this chapter.

In chapter 4, I reflect upon what I heard these young people say they valued in their high schools. Throughout, I heard them indicate an underlying liking for and appreciation of high school. This is where I began. However, looking at the source materials, I found a series of consistent and underlying tensions within the 12 sets of transcripts -- tensions that may not be easily recognized without careful observation. Through a process of setting up individual cards with conversation highlights from each person, I identified five tension areas which I named -- academics, relationships, power, being a teenager, and influence. Based on the quotations from these students, and supported by literature and my own experiences, I reflected on how each of these tensions both stretched and strained these young people.

Chapter 5 focuses on the question, "What do high school students value in their student-adult relationships?" These young people told wonderful stories of over 50 different adults who had made huge differences to them. Working through the transcripts, I identified these stories and descriptions and then charted them all according to the individual adults of whom they were speaking. Since these young people had experienced some similar adults in high school, there were overlaps. I should note, however, that there was not huge overlap. These stories are presented as a series of messages about and to adults entitled "Dear Teacher . . ." The ideas and language included in all of these comes directly from the transcripts. Once again I made minor changes, most notably in the changing of pronouns from "he" or "she" to "you." The formats used to present these messages are designed to be consistent with the daily happenings of a high school. The young people have reviewed these, and in some cases changed portions. They expressed very strong support for these and indicated they were what they would have said, had they shared these messages with teachers or adults in their high school.

Chapter 6 is a reflective look at how a principal might make a high school more friendly for teachers to both hear and react to the messages of young people. To do this, I went back to the transcripts, cut-up chapter 5 into individual messages, and through several sorting procedures identified themes. The chapter is presented based on these themes -- themes which indicate what the young people were asking of their teachers. They are: know me, respect me, make time for me, inspire me, hear me, understand me, and share with me. The comments and stories of the young people provide the major content for this chapter and are supported or questioned by references from literature and my own experiences. Each section of this chapter concludes with questions principals might ask teachers to reinforce the messages of these young people.

Chapter 7 focuses on the question, "What do high school students value in their principal?" I struggled with how best to present this information. I had gone through all the references young people had made about the nine different high school principals they had experienced, and identified a number of stories and descriptions. I wrote these as individual pieces, using the words of students, and making only minor editing changes. I sorted through them a number of times looking for both consistency and unique features. A conversational style "principal's forum" is used to share what students value in their principals. In this chapter I "pretend" to have all these young people together discussing principals. This did not happen in actual fact, as all my conversations were one-on-one with them. The flow of the conversation is somewhat thematic. While I have been careful not to imply that one person's comments triggered another person's comments, the reality of conversation is that we often respond based upon what the people previous to us have said.

Chapter 8 is a reflection of what young people said about principals, set in the context of my personal memories, and supplemented by references from literature. I blended together themes from my personal journal with themes from my conversations with the young people about principals. This was done through an elaborate cutting and sorting process as both the comments of the young people and those in my journal entries were diverse and touched on a number of unique aspects of being a high school principal.

At the conclusion of both my second conversation with young people, and at the final confirmation meeting, I asked them to very generally identify the most important messages they had shared with me. I brought all these ideas together, and looked at them in relation to the more individual messages I had heard. Chapter 9 is a bringing together of these messages, and a sharing of a personal experience of my own. My desire is to share the collective voice of these young people, but perhaps more importantly to point out the need for educators to hear the individual voices of young people.

What these young people have shared opened up countless possibilities for interpretation. I chose to focus on what I felt were the underlying meanings of the stories I had heard. No doubt, a range of possible other interpretations could come from another educator or researcher. I believe that the challenge for each of us is to listen to the voices of these young people, and then to personalize what they say, to our own situations.

A final check

I met with the participants for one final time to share with them how I had taken their spoken language and turned it into text. It was important that each of them be comfortable with what was in print. I asked them to identify anything that was of concern to them. We talked about why I had chosen to feature some stories and ideas over others.

We talked about the issue of the anonymity of this work and that I was willing to change or remove anything that they felt could be traced back to them and would cause them harm or discomfort. These were great conversations. Several of the young people asked me to change certain details -- even though what was written was consistent with the transcripts, they didn't feel the messages had come across quite accurately or with the correct emphasis. We talked about what had happened in their lives since we last met, and what their future plans were. A number of them asked me about the processes of research and were quite intrigued by it. Overall they were very satisfied with both the messages and the different forms of presentation.

I asked two educators who are working in high schools to review the written materials as well and provide ideas about their authenticity. A fellow researcher did an audit review of a sample of materials. All of this feedback and conversation was very insightful and on their recommendations, minor changes were made.

Constant questioning

I have a little idea book that I was given last summer. It was a blank book when I received it, and on its cover it says "Live with intention: dare, listen hard, practice wellness, continue to learn, laugh, play, and live as if this is all there is." This little book is filled with what my research was going to be, could possibly be, might be next time, and actually is today. It was a place to focus, to dream, to question, and to create.

From the outset, I wanted this to be an open process where what was working could be easily blended with new ideas and new perspectives. Generally speaking this is what has happened. I like the concept of not asking what I can do with this research, but what it can do with me. There is a sense of openness to this way of thinking. Agger (1991) suggested that, "methodology can be cracked open and laid bare to outsiders" (p. 120). If research is going to be rigorous it needs to be open to change, to be questioned, and to be an ongoing adventure in learning.

I found this particularly the case as I wrote about what I heard from these young people. My greatest struggle has been one of perspective, perhaps of voice. I forced myself to go back to the three questions I posed at the outset many times. They were questions of what students valued. As I presented their responses, I wanted readers to hear what these 12 young people had to say. Yet as Clandinin and Connelly (1994) pointed out, this tendency to think that research is over when the description has been recorded, has to be fought against. They wrote:

> Field texts may consist of inviting, captivating family stories, conversations, and even dream texts. But researchers cannot stop there, because the task is to discover and construct meaning in those texts. (p. 423)

My struggle was mostly related to how much interpretation I should allow myself. I went back to Heidegger's (1988) comments in my first chapter. He wrote about going beyond "the acquiring of information" and moving on to "the working out of possibilities" (p. 221). The gathering of stories and interpretations I did were done in two parts. First, through the conversations, possibilities were worked out related to my understandings and those of the young people. Then, in further reflection I looked at possibilities in conjunction to my own experiences and what I found in literature.

I went somewhat further than I originally intended in interpreting the comments of these young people. However, their comments truly made me consider so much of what is fundamental to me about education. I needed to write to internalize what I was hearing. The process was incredibly valuable for me. I hope it will be for my readers, particularly those who are working directly with young people in our high schools.

CHAPTER 3

WHAT STUDENTS VALUE

Seeking to understand what young people value in their high school experience, I engaged in a number of informal conversations with 12 young people. In a very open-ended fashion I asked them to share their experiences of high school, stories of importance that they would share with others, and anything else that might let me know what was important to them.

I am sharing parts of the conversations I had with these young people, as a way of presenting what they value in their high school experience. These are the words and expressions the students used. I have brought ideas together, added joining words, and removed some of the "stuff" of oral language in the transcripts, which both the young people and I agreed got in the way of the messages. In each case I have provided a context for the conversation.

I believe that in conversation, we talk about and share that which is important and of value to us. As Hans, one of the young people, said, "I almost always want to talk about something I am interested in." Through these conversations we soon learn what these young people value, what their dreams are and what is most important to them.

Before sharing what these young people said to me, I would like to introduce them. I asked them to "please, in not more than five sentences, write what best describes you as a high school student." Each conversation begins with what they wrote.

Michaela

> *(Age 17) I am very active in school teams and clubs. I am on the athletic council and grad committee, and I've been on the volleyball, swimming, basketball and soccer teams. I work fairly hard on my studies and achieve decent marks.*

Michaela met with me in her family room late one afternoon. Her brother and sister were both home from classes. The phone rang often and the recording of our conversation shows a fair bit of background activity. She started by telling me about herself.

> I'm in grade 12 this year and I think the thing I like most about high school is sports. I don't mind the school aspect, but the sports are what keep me enthusiastic about school. I've played volleyball for three years, soccer and swimming for two years, and basketball in grade 10. Sports will be my main memory of high school, and specifically our trip to the Caribbean to play and practice volleyball.

You seem pretty involved.

> Yeah well, I'm on the athletic council too because it is really important to me to have something to do with what's going on at our school. It has also been very important to me to work with teachers. Before high school I had the impression that teachers were just there to teach and you couldn't really be friends. It's kind of weird because I've got to know some teachers really well and I know I can trust them as people. I think it is really interesting being on that kind of relationship with a teacher.

So, why the change?

> I've grown up a lot in the last three years, and I think, a lot of that has to do with sports.

How so?

> I remember coming to grade 10 as just a really happy, cheerful person. I think I am still, but you grow a lot through your responsibilities. I've learned about

friendships, relationships, and dealing with things. We've all learned about our coaches and the qualities we want to have in our teammates.

And, what are they?

> I admire players who are good leaders, who stay positive on the court, who don't get down on you when you make a mistake, and who don't let their emotions get the best of them on the court. I've learned to level with my coaches and tell them how I feel about the team or about the way they are coaching. It brings you closer to your coaches.

Will you talk about that whole issue of relationships -- of dealing with people.

> Well, relationships are the main thing in high school because you meet so many people. It's hard to know who's going to be your friend and who's just going to be around for awhile and then leave you. You go into high school probably thinking that most people are trustworthy, but you have to learn who is and who isn't, who wants to help, and who really cares.

How does that happen?

> Well, like when I got my license, I came to see who my friends really were. I was driving all the time and got really frustrated. It's easy to tell who's using you for your car, and who's with you because they want to be your friend. When they just call because they want a ride, you kind of have to wonder.
>
> I've also learned a lot about trusting people through boyfriends. When you go out with someone and realize afterwards that they weren't as great as you thought or you learn they aren't as trustworthy as you thought, it gives you a kick in the face and you start to be really cautious.

Is it important, to have a boyfriend?

> It's nice if you're happy together, but if you're always fighting it's not worth it. I also find that I get more work done when I don't have a boyfriend, because I have more time to concentrate on my studies and I don't have to talk on the phone so much at night.
>
> But with my best friends, it's knowing that in the end they'll always be there. I've learned that it is important to show that I want to help them. If a friend shows you that they care, you'll treat them with the same respect.

What's school like -- overall?

> In my school everyone's friends pretty much with everyone. You don't know everybody, but people aren't excluded. It's more like you're friends with who you want to be, and there's nothing wrong with who you chose to be friends with.

Feel safe?

> I don't think much about my safety. Most people who get themselves in trouble situations have done something to provoke it. You can stay safe by minding your own business and not poking your nose into other people's affairs. There's always a chance something could happen, but if you're smart about it, I don't think you have to be worried.

You seem -- like a leader? Do you think students should get involved?

> I think it is important that students have input in school decisions because it is their future and their education. Like, I went to this big planning session we had where there were parents and students and staff. We just worked in groups and answered a series of questions as to how we wanted the school organized -- timetable-wise, semester-wise, and all those types of questions. It was just kind of nice being able to have a say in how it would be the next year as I would be in grade 12 and it is an important year. I really wanted one full-year course along the way and it happened.
>
> It was really interesting to see different points of view and nice to know my input made a difference. I remember a teacher talking about how nice it would be to have a long block of time because they have so much to catch up on. I was shocked, because I thought students had so much more work than teachers do -- cause look at all the homework we get. I was just surprised that the amount they have to do, and how much prep is involved. It kind of opens your eyes as to how much teachers are actually doing.

It's sometimes odd seeing the other side. Michaela, what else is important to you?

> Fairness and caring. They are the two things a school should be built around. Life should be as close to fair as possible. I remember once I was playing volleyball and my coach kept telling me to do this one thing. I wasn't doing it, so I got taken off. I said to him, "Yeah that's fair," and he just laughed.

Fairness -- what's that mean?

> It means not treating people differently because of their marks, or because they are a better student. It's the little day to day things -- when one person misbehaves in a class and the whole class has to be punished, then that just really gets to me.

When teachers just show some sensitivity, it's a big thing. Little things that show they want us to succeed -- going out of their way to help us, noticing if we have a bad day, asking if we need help -- all make a difference.

Why's that important?

Well, high school's a very hard time for a lot of people. We're growing up and we're trying to figure out what we want to be. We are not adults yet, we're trying, but we aren't. We're making mistakes along the way and need the support and encouragement of teachers. We're figuring out what's important to us, our morals and that type of thing. If teachers remember how they felt being a teenager, it makes all the difference.

You've had -- good teachers?

Yeah, they've taught me a lot -- about commitment. It's more than just being in a class and doing your homework. It's showing that you want to be there, doing your work, contributing to the class and helping other people.

Thanks a lot.

You're welcome.

Keith

(Age 18) I see myself as a hard worker and a good athlete. I try to stay on task to get my work done and am very serious about playing sports. People say I take it too serious. I say they're right, 'cause I hate to lose.

Keith and I met in the student services area of his school. We started by talking about high school and choices.

If I knew what I know now, I would have picked my courses more carefully in grade 10. I would have taken grade 10 a lot more seriously.

At the end of high school I will have to make choices. If you are an athlete like me, when you get out of school you want to possibly get a scholarship and move to the States. But if you're a good athlete, but not good in school with grades, you're not going to go anywhere. The schools won't take you if you have bad grades. It doesn't matter how big a star you are.

In grade 10 my school didn't know, and I didn't know that I'd be interested in scholarships in about two years time. Like I carelessly took Science 14 in grade

10. In that path you can't get into biology or chemistry. There will probably be some questions on the SAT about those courses. There didn't seem to be much point going back and taking Science 10. In grade 10 I wasn't really into sports. I played football for the first time in grade 11.

So, why was that?

In grade 11 I changed schools. I had had too many skips and I just wasn't getting my work done. I also knew I could play on the junior basketball team if I transferred schools. Skipping was so easy. The peer pressure thing. Come on, let's skip -- you don't need to go to class, we'll go tomorrow. Then the next day comes, and we say no, let's go tomorrow. It just keeps going on and on.

How've you dealt with that?

Now, there is no point skipping because there are usually teachers walking around and asking if we have spares. I know lots of people now, but I deal with the peer pressure by thinking about football. I'm not going to miss out on a chance that lots of people in Alberta would kill to have. It helps me be more focused on my courses.

You seem pretty focused.

Yeah, right now it is kind of exciting. This scout from the States saw my game and wanted to talk to me. He said there's great potential and I should come to camp. Now I get these letters -- it's kind of a shock these schools hearing about me. It might be that they want running-backs.

It must do your ego some good.

Sometimes there's a bit of an ego thing being on a team at school. You tell your team mates you're going to burn them at practice and after practice they say, "I thought you were going to burn me." It goes on from there -- just talking in the halls.

It's pure trash talking in the halls, you get built up and you think of yourself as one of the best players in the school, or city or province. Trash talking is kind of motivational but some coaches don't like it because it's not sportsmanlike.

What's it like with the other students?

Everybody starts looking at you in the halls. It's not like the States, where you see on TV, gyms and stands full of people watching sports. I guess people in the States like their basketball and football better. But the people who do watch, we do see. Some guys get pretty hyped up when the ladies are there. The girls will smile at you and you'll play good.

Then there are pep rallies and they name off the roster. When I heard my name, the gym went nuts. People chanted my name -- they knew me. Lots of people, teachers and the principal came and talked to me.

Lots of recognition?

Yeah, but most of it comes from guys on your team. I talk to them in school, but out of school I share with my other friends. Most of my friends go to other schools, or are done school and are just working now. I like to do different things on the weekends.

Keith, what would you look for in a school's athletic program?

If you're a really good athlete you'll look for a high school with a great athletic program, because you know you'll be winning games and then the scouts will come to see your games. You know you'll make the team. If you have good skills, you might go to a school that's not so good and help the team look good in the future.

The great schools take their sports seriously -- like basketball and football. They always have those feeder tournaments for junior highs. The junior and senior coaches go to these tournaments and talk to the junior high students. They say come to our school because we have a good program and we think you can make the team. It's serious ball with the right coaches. Everybody's really into it.

You feel okay about school -- like friends, safety?

I've always felt safe at school. Sure, there are going to be fights but you can avoid them by walking away and laughing at it. Like when a guy says you kissed his girlfriend and he wants to beat you up -- you say whatever and you can fight him. But most guys are smart and just walk away. Most guys I talk to don't really fight. If they do, it's them trying to make themselves look bigger in front of their friends. It's just stupid.

If you get into a fight, in the end you're both going to get in trouble. It doesn't matter who started it, it's just, you two are fighting and you're suspended.

So what causes them? Why do they happen?

Well like -- last year a guy started calling us "nigger" and stuff. I just lose it. I don't know why, I just do. I don't want to be hearing stuff like that. I just want to concentrate on my school work, talk to people I talk to at school, get my work

> done, go home, and go on. Then some racist guy comes around, starts saying this stuff, and gets suspended -- there's nothing you can do about it. It can cause big fights and hostile feelings and someone could get stabbed if you mess with him. You don't need that in school.

How've you been treated at school?

> I've been treated fairly by the people at school. There was one time a situation with a school ball. I don't know if it was a black and white thing, or just a school thing. When we talked at the end, I wasn't sure. I told the teacher he could think what he wanted, and I left because I didn't want to talk to him. I could think it was racist or I could think he was just protecting school property. I don't know.

Keith, thanks -- and good luck!

Victoria

> *(Age 17) What best describes me as a high school student is conscientious, hard-working, dedicated and involved. I was always consistent in going to class and completing my assignments. I was also very involved with my high school, especially in my grade 12 year. I was a member of the Graduation Executive Committee and was also involved with provincial volleyball. A large part of my high school experience was going to junior highs to help students know what to expect for high school.*

We chatted around Victoria's family's kitchen table. Her Mom, Dad and younger brother all came in while we spoke. Her mother, an avid gardener, promised me some perennials -- I mustn't forget them. We were talking about her high school and tours she had led.

> Several times I had the opportunity to tour visitors around our school or just talk to people about my high school. I couldn't tell them enough! Every room we went in I just had a different story about the teacher. The people we took on tours saw how enthusiastic I was because I loved my high school. To this day, I love it.

Why is that?

> As far as I'm concerned our high school was a modern school. It was really a school where students and teachers interacted. Students had input into decisions. Teachers really were not just teaching a class, but they were teaching a group of young people that they wanted to succeed.

You could tell?

> Definitely, the teachers always took the time out to make sure we were doing well. That enthusiasm just came through. I loved helping out at Open House. I got to tell these junior highs that it's just the most incredible school, and that they would not understand until they came and really saw what it was like.

So what would they have seen?

> It was just such a different school. It felt right. We had a younger principal who brought lots of ideas into the school. I remember meeting him the day I registered. Lots of times in classes, somebody would just say something and we would just start joking back and forth. The teacher would get involved too. They weren't just there because it was their job. They even had a staff intramural team that just made a difference.
>
> Sometimes when we were working on homework in class a teacher would come up and just ask us, how's it going, or maybe something about grad or about our weekend at work. They seemed to remember each different thing about a student. They'd relate what they did in high school to what we were doing. Or when we were registering for university, they'd tell us they'd taken the same courses. It just was more of a friendship relationship.

The people, the connections seemed important?

> For sure. I met so many fantastic people. I think that's probably what helped make my graduation perfect -- graduating from the school I loved with the best friends I'd ever had. The biggest thing for me was that I was involved with graduation. I really cared how it was set up. It was a big part of my grade 12 year -- going from a childhood world to an adult world.

Tell me, what did you do?

> As part of the graduation executive we got to look at all aspects of it. I contributed my ideas and was part of a team. There were a lot of differences of opinions so we really had to work to come to a compromise that everyone was going to like -- like the banquet colors or the stage set up.
>
> Or the grad song, that was a big one. We listened to tons of songs and finally decided it didn't matter what kind of music it was, as long as it spoke to us about what our grad was. It was really a lot of talking and a lot of give and take.

Some real learning?

> For sure, it really helped me work better as part of a team. I had never really been fond of group work. I liked doing it my way. At university I've noticed projects

> and labs are usually done in partners or groups and you have to divide the tasks to get everything handed in. When you get out on the job site you have to be part of a team. Grad taught me it's really hard to do it all by myself.

It changed you a bit?

> I think so. When I came into grade 10 I was fairly confident, but people I met back then say I have completely changed in high school. Teachers would say they knew I could do it and that gave me confidence. That was probably the biggest thing because it gave me the power to just rise above whatever was holding me down.

Your teachers gave you this confidence?

> Yeah, and a lot had to do with the friends I met in high school. They helped me just go out there and do what I thought was right. I went from this shy, quiet person to a more open, more willing-to-try-things type.

Will you tell me more -- about your teachers or your courses.

> A big thing was my science enrichment program. We didn't just go through the course twice as fast and get twice as much homework. The teachers were really good about bringing in extra activities. In Bio 30 we went to the Devonian Botanical Gardens where we did a population study. It felt like a study, not just a class.
>
> In Physics 30 we went to the Genesee Power Plant. Now that was neat to view how the stuff we learned applied to real life. At the mall we got to calculate how fast the roller coaster was going, just from really simple data. I mean, it wasn't complicated long calculations.
>
> We did quite a few labs in high school and the skills I learned through my physics and chemistry courses in high school really help out the lab aspect at university. When you actually see practical applications it just makes such a big difference.

Is that why you're in Engineering?

> My high school science teachers and classes helped me gain the confidence to go into Engineering. I remember in Bio 20 our teacher told us we were going to have a medical examiner come in. For some reason we all assumed it was a male, but it was a female, and everyone in the class just went, oh!

That happen often?

> We had a lot of female guest speakers in areas of science and math that normally weren't traditionally female. We really got a chance to see that there were women who were going out and working in these traditionally male fields. I'd think, if they can do it, why can't I? I'm the same as them. I really can do anything I want.
>
> I think another big part of helping me choose to go into engineering was when we did the mentorship program in science. In my first year I worked with a math teacher from the university. It was interesting but it didn't super interest me. I couldn't sit there and do equations all day.
>
> The second year I worked with an optometrist because I was kind of leaning towards biology. But, I found that I liked working with the math and applied sciences like physics. It really helped me narrow down things I didn't like and things I did like.

Sounds like some interesting experiences. You, liked it all?

> Mostly, but in grade 12 there was a lot of pressure to get the marks to apply to university. Sometimes we just needed a break, a class where we'd be given some work to work on, and we could choose to work on it or do it for homework.
>
> I was with students who were really involved with academics, and the teachers would let us go by ourselves. There was a lot more self-learning. The teacher was always there and gave the lesson, but sometimes they'd just leave a little something out, and you had to figure it out by yourself.
>
> If it got too serious, sometimes a joke just relieved the tension. We'd all laugh for a few minutes, feel life was great, and get back to work.

A light moment made a difference?

> For sure. It seemed the teachers, the principal and office staff wanted the school to be a place where students were happy to come and where everybody did well. We'd be sitting there at lunch sometimes and teachers would sit down and start talking with us. Once we told our math teacher it was all over our heads and we didn't know what we were doing. The teacher said, "All right, I know this now, and we can work on it!"
>
> I think that a big part of a principal's job is just making sure that there's something for every student. It would be great if every student could get involved. It's not necessarily going to happen, but it's important to have the opportunity.

You found that something for you?

> Definitely, even now I can still phone the school and the receptionist still knows who I am and asks how it is going. The fact that you're not just graduated and forgotten is a huge thing.

Yeah, it's a nice feeling. Thanks Victoria.

> No problem!

Mark

> *(Age 18) Currently, this is my fourth year attending high school. Only in the past two years have I been regularly attending my classes. I seem to have overcome some of the problems which occurred in the past because of my lack of respect to authority. Maybe I've grown up and gotten out of that stage or maybe I've realized that by bucking the "system" it doesn't get you anywhere. I am enjoying my education now and value the respect between teacher and student that I receive because of my age. My education has now only begun and I will go further to better myself.*

We met on a very cold January afternoon at Mark's school. Of all the students, it was obvious that he had spent the most time writing about himself. His profile was incredibly neatly printed on a separate piece of paper. We talked about his social group and how important it was.

> Honestly, when I left junior high school I chose this high school because no one I knew was coming and I wanted to be away from my friends. I went from being a straight A student in grade 6 to getting 50 and 60 in grade 9. I wanted to get away from the hang-out life and do good in school. As it turned out, a lot of my friends ended up coming with me. Actually, I'd rather have just gone to school and been a little book worm.
>
> Instead I had so many people around. Eight people on different days would come and ask if I wanted to skip. I'm not saying they forced me, but there was always that thought in my head -- yeah, I really don't feel like going to class. It's a lot harder to say no when the chance is presented to you -- especially by friends.

New friends, or your old friends?

> I know a lot of new people just from being in high school, but my close friends are still ones that I met in junior high and some from elementary. Most of the people I've met at school are just school friends -- just school associates. I don't really do anything with them outside of school.

Why is that?

> I don't know. But I haven't really been in sports. I like sports -- swimming, soccer, track and field. I never went out for school teams because of the sports policy. I'm not saying I'm the greatest, but nobody wants to be on a team that has no chance of winning. I just never wanted to be on a team like that.
>
> And dances, I think I've come to two dances in four years. Once we came, we were drunk and stuff happened. Almost a fight with my buddies, so we never came to one after that.
>
> I don't know, maybe that's why I think differently about the school, because we never did extra curricular things with it. It's just classroom time and then there's home time. I just never really took part in any of the stuff after school, or anything. That might make a difference for me.

What could -- have changed that?

> That's hard to say. A lot of kids have just one-sided views. I did! They just think everyone is against them and that they have to be their own person. Like they almost think they have to start something, when really they don't want to.
>
> Like a slur. They don't stop to think -- like what it's like to be -- say to be a black person, or a principal, or a white person.
>
> Or some people go around calling themselves "niggers," but when someone else calls them that they make a big deal out of it. They claim to be racially slurred and whine a lot until it is dealt with. Even if the comments were made in the first place in response to them calling us things like "white trash."

What do you mean?

> It is hard to explain that calling someone "nigger" is more to do with how someone is acting than because he is black. More like the MTV kind of attitude.

So how can, say a principal, learn more about -- or deal with this?

> That's a tough one. I'd be really scared to not make a harsh decision if I was a principal, but the whole thing still just throws me. Society has made racism seem so harsh and one-sided, but it's always two-sided. Like if you don't want to get stared at, then don't stare at me.

You have friends, of other races?

People of other colors can be friends, but when stuff like this happens they're not friends anymore. They turn against you, but then once it's dealt with they come back and things are cool.

I don't know -- blood's stronger than friends, I guess. We stick together. We stick with our own. It seems that's what we're supposed to do.

You, intimidated by that?

No, I don't feel intimidated anymore, because I'm not in that kind of punk scene where kids just beat each other up for no reason. But you've got to worry a bit about your safety. It's dangerous out there and guys don't fight one-on-one. Even if three guys jump you and you beat them up, they'll turn around and bring back 10 guys.

Even if fights start because someone is a goof or makes you mad, they always turn racial because someone is brown, or white, or black or oriental. It's just like a little show down. It can start anywhere. It might not end in the school.

Why not?

The consequences of fighting are harsher at school. I can't think of anytime in public where I've gotten in trouble for fighting. I don't think you can totally stop it though. I just think it is the way people are.

Tell me Mark, what's school like for you?

Sometimes it can seem more like a jail than an education. They're stressing so much not being in the halls, I feel like I can't even go for a cigarette and then go sit in the cafeteria. I mean if you're having a spare and walking alone quietly, I don't think it should be a problem.

I think cramming us into one smoking section is crazy. Who wants to go smoke with 100 people when your jacket gets burned because everyone is standing so close. I understand that in front of the school looks trashy. People coming to the office don't need to have 20 teenagers staring at them, all smoking in front of the building. But there's no reason not at the other doors.

It almost makes it impossible to even have a full cigarette with the seven minute breaks we have. But you know, I didn't want to change the smoking thing last year when they were doing a survey, because I thought I was going to quit smoking.

You didn't? Why not?

> Like, it's almost that I don't have to get comfortable here. I think lots of people think that way. They want to get out of here so bad that they don't mind if the school isn't perfectly adapted to their needs. The hassle is almost a motive to get out. One side of me thinks it would be great if I enjoyed being here, though.

One side of you?

> Yeah, I do enjoy school a lot more than I used to. I can think of a lot of better things to do than be at school, but I don't feel when I am here that I'm out of place or anything. I feel comfortable going to my classes, but it's not exactly a place I enjoy hanging out. Like, God, I'd rather be in Mexico!

Yeah, looking outside, so would I.

> You know, I see these grade 10s around the school and I'm a bit scared for them.

Why's that?

> They don't listen. They won't listen to anybody -- I wouldn't have in grade 10. Still I'd just like to tell them:
>
> *You guys are amazing. You're just two years behind me, and I'm just realizing how much I've changed. I mean there you were in class today farting and burping and then giggling about it! It's weird.*
>
> *I heard two of you walking down the hall today laughing about how you skipped out. You said you'll write your own notes and your mom will never find out. You kids really don't understand it. Your education isn't going to just pop into your brains.*
>
> *You've got to do it and the easiest way is to go regularly to class. I mean, you'll get a 50 or a 60 if you just go to class. It's acquired knowledge, just hearing it everyday and talking about it. If you want to go higher, like 70 or 80 then studying will bring it up from 50.*
>
> *I'm scared for you kids. I think you need to learn things on your own. It's sad you don't get to drop out for a year, go to work, and come back. You'd learn a lot more than just being told.*
>
> *But, you've only got three years, so don't screw up. Good luck!*

Good luck to you Mark. Thanks a lot.

> No problem.

Bill

> *(Age 18) I was a very active music student. I won the highest award possible each year in both fine arts and service to the community, as well as attendance awards for all three years. I expected to be in high school for four years but got accepted into U of A, Faculty of Arts, in only three years. Grades 11 and 12 were the two best years of my teenage life.*

We sat on the couch in Bill's living room -- across from the piano which he plays. The first time we met, Bill had been really lonely -- one person in a big university. I asked him to tell me what was important to him in his high school experience.

> I was heavily into music, and I think that mostly came from my music teacher who pushed me to do as much as I could do in the time I had. In grade 10 I was playing the clarinet and we were playing this music that was just too easy for me. I said I wanted to change instruments, my teacher said okay and I played the tenor sax for the rest of that year.
>
> In grade 11 I played the bari sax which is an instrument I'd never touched before. I worked on that for a couple of months and got a good sound out of it. Later that year in jazz band I was pushed to play the alto saxophone and played some percussion also.

You were busy!

> Yes, I was in the lunch time choir and all the other music groups there were. I remember one concert I had no break because I was in every single group that was playing. I could have taken music anywhere, but it was weird because if I hadn't gone to my high school, I would be still on my first instrument because I wouldn't have been wanting to switch instruments.

Is that right?

> Yes, it was a new music program with more individuality. My teacher even knew my parents -- probably because of how many times they showed up to stuff.

So, your involvement in music -- what did it give you?

> Well, it gave me confidence and it gave me a good mark to get into the U of A. My average was always relatively low. I was looking at doing four years of high school. In grade 12 it happened that band was in the first semester and I had a final mark relatively early. I had tried to keep up on everything, had done re-tests when my mark wasn't 100, and ended up with a 97 in the class.

Half way through the second semester I picked up my calculator and typed in some numbers and realized that my average was above the 65%, I needed to get into the Faculty of Arts. I got the conditional acceptance and it forced me to do a little more studying on the diplomas. I was able to finish school in three years.

The music -- it made a difference to the rest of your school life?

Probably the self confidence I got in music helped my marks in other classes too. I guess I didn't get as down when I didn't do very well. I failed, like three courses in high school, and was able to bounce back from two of them. The third one I couldn't because it was Math 30. I didn't really need it because I already had Math 33 in my back pocket.

Anything else?

I guess the other thing was because of music, I made more friends. Friends that are mostly younger, so they're still back at school while I'm at university all by myself. Music's one of those different courses that incorporates all three grades and I always had friends that were older or younger than me.

We were forced into the same classes together and we all had the same interests. I sat next to some of them, we talked a lot, and spent a lot of lunch times together because of the co-curricular activities in the music room. It was neat.

You actually realize that no matter what grade you're in, you fit in, you're all at different levels, but you have the same interest. Shaun was a year younger than me, but he was playing at a higher level -- it's kind of weird because that's real life.

You keep in touch?

They're still good friends. Anytime I go back to high school, I know a lot of people that are happy to see me, and I am happy to see them.

What's important -- how big the group is, how well you know them -- what?

It doesn't matter how big your group is, it is just important how close they are. It's nice to have a lot of good friends because then there's lots of different people. But a small group is easier to get together and I think the closeness and how much trust you have in them, is probably the most important.

Any girlfriends? Was that important?

I had a girlfriend in grade 12 -- I could tell her whatever and she'd just judge me on who I was. I don't know if it's having a girlfriend that's important, or just a

> good friend that you can talk to about anything, and spend a lot of time with. Somebody really close that you can share everything with.

What do you remember about your other courses?

> Last year I took both English 33 and Math 33 in the first semester and Math 30 and English 30 second semester. It seemed to me that the 33 students were more willing to have some enjoyment. The teaching styles were a lot different, the people a lot friendlier, and the classes were a lot lighter. There was a lot more laughing, and the teachers were, of course, a lot calmer.

A different feeling, hey?

> Yes, there was more socializing in my 33 classes between students, and student to teacher. I'm not sure if it was because the teachers were a little more relaxed or because the students were more free willed. Maybe it was their career goals were different. Even with the same teacher, the 33 classes seemed lighter, maybe not as serious, but serious enough.

Why the difference, say even with the same teacher?

> Teachers are on a very strict timeline, they've got five months to teach this one course, and no matter what they do, all this material's going to be on a diploma at the end of the year.

You could feel that?

> Yes, I think that is probably the biggest criticism I would give about high school -- not having an independent class time when dealing with school issues. You need a separate class where you have 40 minutes to discuss one thing. Then there'd be no rush and we wouldn't be spending teacher's time to do school stuff. Quality time to discuss school issues is important to us.

Bill, did you get to know your teachers very well?

> I had three teachers that I had every single year. I think those three teachers together, sort of helped me. I could spend upwards of five hours a week with them. They knew my strengths and weaknesses and knew if there was something that I would have trouble with.
>
> And I always had some sort of connections with the secretaries in my schools. In high school they knew me. They seemed more interested in knowing me, not what was in my file. They knew I was Bill, not Bill in Social 20 or Bill Jones. The secretaries who didn't even see me for hours at a time, knew me by name and it was really nice.

Important stuff!

> Yes, and I think the teachers showed they were interested in student life. They had a staff jazz band and they were very willing to let me be part of that band even though I was a student. They had a staff volleyball team. It showed a little friendly competition, a little more interest because they were always bragging, relieved a lot of stress, and kept things alive in the school.
>
> I felt like I was part of the school, not just attending. I like to be around people who know me -- people who are in a good mood, show me respect and are on the same level as me.

Sounds like they were good times?

> I would just say that my grade 11 and 12 were the best two years of my teenage life. Because of the friends. Because of friends, both my age and teachers. Because of the music, I did a lot better in music. Probably my activities out of school were a little more rewarding too.

Neat! I appreciate the insights you shared this morning.

Jane

> *(Age 18) I took great interest in being a high school student. It is those three years that help us determine our self-concepts. It is where we make some very important decisions towards our future. I learned problem solving and people skills that would be used later in life. As I grew up and experienced new situations I also became more responsible, organized and accepting of others.*

Jane and I conversed around her dining room table. Each time we met, she was excited about reliving her time in high school. Both her parents, who are proud of her and very involved in her life, took the time to talk when I visited. Jane started by talking about her selection of a high school.

> I came to high school knowing only two or three people. It gave me the opportunity to start new and meet new people. Everything was fresh and I just started things from the beginning, in a sense. I hadn't had such memorable junior high school experiences. I needed something new, and I felt that I needed to start on my own.
>
> Grade 10 was very, very exciting every single day because I got to meet so many new people, but yet keep in contact with old friends.

Can you think back to how you met one particular person who became a good friend?

> The day I met Shannon Johnson, I'll remember forever. We were in Students' Council and it was just the beginning -- if you're interested in joining -- meeting. We were in a big circle and I remember exactly what she was wearing and everything -- brown cords and a plaid shirt to match. I looked at her and thought she was the most beautiful person in the world -- I thought she was just gorgeous. I sat beside her and started talking and realized that we were very much alike -- interests, music and she was in the Students' Council too. She encouraged me to join and she was very supportive. That got me off to a really good start.

Any others?

> I remember Jennifer because she was like me, but older. I used to call her "chief" because she always had the right answers and knew exactly what was happening. I was in grade 10 and these two girls that were older were like mentors and I could look up to them.

What did they teach you, or what were the big lessons you learned?

> You learn that you go to high school to get an education. I think there are things at school that sometimes can distract you from getting that education, because you get so tied up in other things. I loved every minute of being on everything, but sometimes there are so many activities, so many trips, so many things to do at times, that you have to put your foot down and say I'm here to go to school and I can't do this. You have to make some decisions about what you want.
>
> High school is that point where it really determines what's going to happen for later in life. Your responsibility, your organization and your attendance are very good indicators of what you're going to do for the next 10 years.

How did you do that?

> It's a personal thing. If I had a 95 average, just brilliant in school, yet had no friends and wasn't involved in the school, then it wouldn't be balanced for me. I have to have balance to be a completely happy person. Each thing -- friends, involvement in school and academics -- just gave me that whole that I needed and made me proud of what I'd done.

What kinds of involvement made up that "whole"?

> Being on the Students' Council or the Grad Council or the Parent Council gave me opportunities and sort of gave me permission -- if I wanted to share an idea or change a fact, it was much easier to do because I was part of these groups.

Because I was involved it was not such a big deal for me to come and say this is what I think.

I felt that as a student it was part of my responsibility and I had the right to know. Not everyone takes action to voice their opinion when the opportunity is given to them. Sometimes I would wonder why anyone else isn't involved, or asking questions, or finding out where things are coming from.

What'd you learn from all that?

Self-confidence and positive self-concept are huge things that I developed throughout high school. It was a thing where I was comfortable with people because of all my activities. If I had to walk down the hall by myself, it was no big deal. I never once had that where someone made fun of me, like in junior high. I never thought that I would not be safe. I didn't need to walk with a group from class to class. I was just comfortable.

It sounds comfortable!

It was. Our student body was great. Sure, people had their own little groups at times, but overall not cliques. I got along with a lot of people, but as far as having a group at school, I didn't have one. I didn't go to one school party in three years -- I went to other parties on the weekends. I drew the line and I don't think many people really got to know me.

Why was that?

I have my friends that I am personally close to, I have my school people and my work people. I don't mix them all together. I would never date somebody going to the same school or working in the same environment. I find that when you're really close and all best friends and you all go to the same school together, it just gets a little overwhelming at times. I need that privacy to be myself.

It gives me that break. Now, almost a year later, the people from elementary and junior high school I thought I'd be close with, I'm not. It's the people from high school I'm really close with right now. We have more in common.

So, were you able to find time to -- study?

Definitely, I always put time in to study, to be there and to get extra help. I expected teachers to put in their 50% as long as I was willing to put mine in. You could see those teachers who were willing to put extra time in, who were early and prepared for class, and which ones weren't. It's like the students -- you can look at students and say which ones are prepared for class and which one's aren't.

What made a teacher good for you?

> They need to establish that respect first of all by letting students make decisions for themselves and approaching them with questions. Then once they're actually teaching the stuff, they need to make sure we understand, photocopy extra handouts if we need it, have extra classes or seminars, and help us out if we have questions. It can be a great experience or an okay experience. That's what makes the difference.
>
> And it's not just at the teachers' level, but at the coordinator level and at the principal level -- the whole school functioning as a whole. I think parents should take an interest in their children's education too.

You want that?

> Definitely, I see too many students my age where parents aren't there. I remember my mom would write down all the dates and tell me that report card day was Wednesday or the newsletter was supposed to be out on Monday! I realize every parent in the world can't do that, but I have friends whose parents wouldn't ask for a report card all year.
>
> How I look upon school definitely had something to do with my parents and they've had that impact on me. I enjoyed it when my dad and I were both on the Parent Council. It was a really neat experience for both of us because he took that interest and wanted to know what was happening with the school.

Was there a highlight for you, of say, your high school?

> Grade 12! It was the best year of my life. It was incredible. I got into nursing. I don't know what I would have done with myself if I hadn't. I was one of the valedictorians and I had a huge impact on grad. I did really well in bio which I was quite proud of because I needed it for nursing. I had great friendships, had a boyfriend and everything was perfect. I was so involved in everything and felt that what I was doing was making an impact. I felt appreciated and felt rewarded.

Thank you Jane, for sharing so eloquently.

> I'm always happy to talk about high school and I guess in a sense I miss it now. I love nursing, I love post-secondary, I love college life, but I miss that feeling -- I guess I felt I had control there, and made decisions.
>
> I miss it -- yeah.

Mangus

> *(Age 19) I am an outgoing person, I love to meet people and dream with them. I believe that my respect for people and my off-the-wall personality would have made me an excellent high school student. If, that is, I had applied it to my schooling and not my social lifestyle. I enjoyed my years at high school and came away with a lot more than I had when I started -- experiences, wisdom, an education, and of course a lot of friends.*

I saw Mangus at a distance a few weeks ago as he was crossing a street. The person I saw seemed like a complete stranger, not the young man I had come to know and enjoy. We had met in two different "bachelor pads." One a house where he lived with three other fellows, the other a basement suite. The locations were comfortable for him and he readily talked.

> High school was basically a social outlet for me. I met a lot of friends and we talked -- we shared our dreams and our problems. Lots of people in high school liked to talk to me because I was very open about almost anything. I don't think I'll ever be in a situation where I'll make that many friends again at one time.
>
> Nothing really bothers me, except lack of respect. My personal rule is respect. Without respect you have nothing. Without it you could be acquaintances, but never a friend. Usually if you show respect to someone, they'll show it back.
>
> I could have pulled a lot more out of high school if I applied myself to the actual work. As it was, I still came away with a lot more knowledge than when I went in. I lost a lot of time because of my friends. I could have easily done high school, been out and still had the friends, but at the time it wasn't what I wanted.

So what were you like?

> I was a Prep in grade 11. Baggy jeans, belt, tucked in shirt, nice combed hair -- I had it all slicked back in a nice pony tail. Generally the attitude that goes with Prep is that you are part of a group. We beat people up if we don't like them, we go drinking together, we talk about girls together -- everything's just a group.
>
> In grade 12, I was basically one of the few alternative people, so I was Freak Boy. I was myself, part of my own group and a pacifist. It really surprised me, but almost everyone in the school at least twice a week, would have a conversation about me. It would just blow my mind.

What'd they say?

Oh, I heard: your pants just rock so bad, or you looked so rad yesterday in that suit, or we spend two hours at a party last night just talking about how weird you are. I guess people just wondered about me.

Why's that?

I'm a little crazy sometimes and I think people find that interesting, and almost a bit scary. I used to wear a lot of chains. I like being shiny, and making a lot of noise. I also wore a lot of necklaces and rings. Once I put one on, they just grew around my body and it was fun.

Lots of people would call me that guy with the chains. I think they wanted to grab me and just strangle me. My friend started spreading rumors that I was very, very chemically unbalanced. That stopped them thinking of taking me on!

I'll bet!

Yeah, people thought I was unpredictable, basically. They didn't know what to expect from me -- I might just freak out and start dancing in the middle of the hall. I didn't care what people thought. I usually do things for myself, but sometimes I do them just to see other people's reactions.

Is that what you want? Reactions?

Right, and I wanted respect. Like, I played soccer and that got me a lot of respect by a lot of people. It was like an achievement. I played for myself, to enjoy it and to win. People respected my efforts because I was fast, I played mid-field which is one of the toughest positions, and I set people up for goals. It was a weird mix with everything else. I basically lost my mentality as an individual on the soccer field, because you're no longer an I, but a team.

Did that surprise people?

It shocked a lot of people. In school people didn't know what I was going to do, but on the soccer field they could always trust me -- to be there, to make a good pass, to make a good play, or to help out. I was part of them, part of the team when I was out there. My hair was always really weird on the soccer field. Even when I started to change outside of soccer, soccer didn't really change for me. It was a fun time.

It was hey. Tell me more.

Basically in high school lots of kids feel that school generally sucks. If you look at it, you're doing what the government wants you to do. You're doing what people

> think you should do. But you aren't getting ahead anywhere, because everybody's doing the same thing.
>
> It's when you get out of high school that you go ahead. You do what you want to do. You start going in your own direction. So, in high school you don't really need to go ahead, because everybody's doing the exact same thing. You just need to keep up and get average marks. You don't need to excel in anything necessarily until you're doing what you want to do. It's after high school when you get ahead and where you succeed.

So, is that what you did?

> I've never really had a work ethic, but I've always respected school. I was happy to be in an environment where I was accepted. I could go to any teacher in the school and they'd know me. I could go down the hall and ask almost anyone to help me.

You were, happy?

> Yeah, generally students were happy. All high school students say they hate school but actually we didn't mind being there all that much. We respected the school -- not necessarily the building as much as the school itself.

Why was that?

> We had a strong foundation in grade 10 and 11. I was on the Students' Council where I made a lot of friends. When I was in grade 12, the grade 10s coming in had no real choice whether they wanted to be happy or not. They were happy!

Other things -- about your school?

> It was very hard to be involved with drugs at school, there was little violence and this kept it a very positive school. The rules were set and we all knew we weren't going to get away with anything. It's the whole school that has to create the positive environment -- where we're respected.

And yours did?

> Yeah, in high school, even from teachers in high school, I got a lot of respect. People generally liked me. I tended to avoid those who didn't respect me. Most teachers would come up to me and say, "Mangus you've got great puppy dog eyes and a great personality, but that ain't going to get you where you want to be." You know, it's kind of cool that they all noticed and cared enough to come out and tell me that.

Can you tell me about a time -- you felt -- noticed?

> Grad was a very good time. It was really surprising to me. I thought we'd go eat, say hi to a few people and leave. But I won an award -- "The Most Creative" type thing. It was really, really nice. I was just walking up, I wasn't expecting it at all, and a bunch of people started cheering and yelling.
>
> I basically got a standing ovation. It said to me that I was succeeding in the goals I had for myself -- to try to do what I want to do at all times and to have the respect of my peers. I'd paid seven bucks for my green suit, and when the disco dancing came on, everybody was watching me. It was cool to be respected, especially at your grad time, and to find out that you were there for four years and people did remember the fun times.

You're pretty positive about it.

> Yeah, it was a chance to try a lot of things. That's basically what high school was. I pulled a lot of wisdom out of high school. I'm a lot more mature, I'm a lot more of an adult, and a lot more sure of myself than when I went into high school. It gave me more enthusiasm for life in general and more respect. There was a lot of personalized education and everybody was happy to see people succeeding.

Regrets?

> Not really. If I'd applied myself I could have learned really easily, but it wasn't my goal at the time. I write poetry almost every day now. I want to be an English teacher. I think I am the one person I know who can relate to teenagers because I've done a lot. I could definitely give the respect to my students that I'd expect back.

Well thanks Mangus. Anything else?

> Just one thing. High school was one of the most positive influences in my life so far. If I was rich, I'd contribute back to my high school because of what it gave me.

I hope you become rich and a teacher! Both at the same time.

Carolyn

> *(Age 15) I am involved in a lot of extra-curricular activities. These include coaching cheerleading, several choirs and various church activities. My marks*

> *are in the honors range and I am trying to finish High School early. I spend a lot of time with friends. I am looking at going into Education at university.*

When I phoned Carolyn, she suggested we meet at her house on the Friday morning at the end of exam week. I wondered if that would be a problem, as I was concerned she might be alone. Finally, I called her Mom and asked if it were okay with her that we meet. She said sure, and felt she may be home anyway. I ended up making similar calls to other parents. No one was concerned, but they appreciated the call.

Carolyn began talking about friends.

> I have a whole bunch of different groups of friends. Some are friends only at school, some outside of school, and the people I eat lunch with and do a lot of stuff with are the people that go to my church too. I do just about everything with my friends.

How'd you meet them all?

> At school I mostly got to meet people through other people -- introductions, sitting next to them, listening to them answer questions, or one person to the next having similar friends.

What makes a -- good friend?

> I don't know, just someone who notices when you're not feeling well, if you're upset or mad at that teacher. People who kind of understand where you're coming from. I feel like we kind of support each other.

Is it easy to mix with others?

> I like that about our school -- all the different groups are really mixed. Definitely there are groups of friends that are closer, but nobody has problems being friends with other people. The grades really mix and nobody seems to care. The actual building seems open and less like a school -- there's lots of space for people.
>
> I think that when people come from junior highs there's a lot of people they don't know. So they find someone they know, or someone they didn't really know but who they knew were in their junior high. There's different groups that are always together, but at the same time, if you were to walk in and that group was all standing around you wouldn't be out of place. I feel included still.

That's neat. Tell me about your classes.

> I'm not in any of the enrichment classes, and I certainly could be if I wanted to be. I chose not to do that just because I felt like I was getting enough out of my

> normal classes. In most of my classes my teachers are willing to go over and above the actual outline. I find that the enrichment classes are basically the same group of people in each class. I like being mixed in with other people a lot more, rather than separating myself from the rest of the school.

You, get enough attention in these classes?

> I think that I get asked questions in class quite a lot less because teachers know that I am probably understanding. Mostly the reason they ask other people questions is so that they can find out whether people are understanding or not.
>
> There are different expectations. Students who don't do well are expected to do a lot more in class to almost show that even though their marks are low, they're really trying. Because my marks are higher, I don't have to prove to the teachers at all that I'm trying.

You don't?

> No, and I think I probably have more room to do things differently from other students because I understand most of the stuff that's going on. I also think that if for some reason I don't really do as well as I usually do on tests, the teachers are generally disappointed. I don't think that they should be disappointed in me for getting a 75 on a test, just because I usually get higher.

You said most of your teachers are willing to give you extras. How does this happen?

> I really appreciate it when my teachers are willing to discuss topics further. My English teacher is willing to have us take a question to a different level and listen to our ideas even if it's not directly related to what we're doing.
>
> Or my social teacher is always willing to discuss, explain and spend time with questions that necessarily other students wouldn't think of.
>
> Our CALM teacher respected and was interested in our point of view. She basically started conversations and then they would get bigger and bigger as more people would get involved.

You want to be a teacher. What's important to you -- about teachers, teaching?

> Teachers need to be able to find the balance in the relationship with their students where the students can still learn everything that they need to, and the teacher can still be in control of the class, but they can also have a little bit of fun with the students so the students aren't bored to death. I guess I really have had some excellent teachers where I look back and say, that class was a lot of fun.

Especially my chem class last year -- I loved that class so much, I just loved that class!

I think teachers should just be friendly, but not like your friend because then they lose their control. Principals too. I think that a principal should try to be on a friendly level with students but I know that's really hard because most students don't think, let's be buddies with the principal. But students need to feel they really can talk to their principal and not be uncomfortable going into the principal's office. Students need to find him friendly, but not like their friend.

So what do you think principals should be doing?

I've had two principals. One we didn't actually see him much. Everyone knew he had the highest say in the school, but a lot of us found him really unapproachable. He wasn't someone who you could just go in and talk to. A lot of people in our school didn't even know who he was, they knew his name, but they never saw him.

What impressed me about the other principal was that everybody knew who he was and he made himself very known. Like he knew my name and I'd only gone into the office twice. I think the teachers actually respected him too, and felt comfortable approaching him, the same way we felt comfortable approaching him. I think administration should make sure that the students know who they are, and find them approachable.

You think, students in your school are involved?

If students want to be involved in the students' councils they definitely can. They influence the fun things, the extra curricular things. There are fun days every week and special weeks where it's activities every single day at lunch. People usually participate for fun, but you get a certain number of points if you participate. Things like multicultural celebrations are really well organized and done by the students' councils totally.

Sounds neat.

Yes, but it's mainly the extra fun things where all the student leadership goes. They don't have much influence as far as the big issues. Nobody has any say really, except the principal. Even the president of the Students' Council would probably not go talk to the principal, because I don't think they feel that they have much say as far as the school goes.

Hm, so what do you expect from, say, the adults in your school?

It's important for anybody working in a high school to remember that most of the students can be treated as adults and they enjoy some responsibility. The giving of

> responsibility to students shows that teachers trust them, at least a little bit. A lot of times high school students are more grown up than the teachers give them credit for. We're not as naive as the teachers kind of tend to think.

They don't expect too much of you?

> No, I've never found that teachers treated us too much like adults.

Rebecca

> *(Age 17) I think that I am an image of other high school students. Much of my identity has changed since I entered high school, and I feel that the personality I have assumed is a reflection of that of the others around me. To best describe myself, I'd say that I have the intelligence of those I admire, the personality (socially) of those that I don't, and the self esteem that was installed by my parents.*

Rebecca met me one morning during exam week at her home. She had prepared coffee which we both enjoyed as we chatted. We were speaking about high school life and just being a teenager.

> Part of being a teenager is that you reflect what you're supposed to reflect at that point in time. There are limits set by the situation that you're in. I don't know if I'm more myself at home, more myself at church, or more myself at school, but I do know it's a reflection of what I think is appropriate at the time.

How would I know who you are -- how to treat you?

> I want to be treated like a teenager. I want it taken into consideration that I don't know what I'm doing. We see adults as always knowing what they're doing, but that's probably completely untrue because when I was younger I saw teenagers as knowing what they were doing.

> We're people who are almost adults, we're earning the good stuff that comes with being an adult but we also want the freebies. Even though we hang around with the same people, dress identically, talk identically and do our hair identically, we want adults to see us as individuals with separate names and identities.

So, how can we do this?

> Don't assign us something completely impossible. Assign us roles that are manageable and respect that we can't do things that adults do. When adults have

> enough tolerance and acceptance of the mind-numbing vortex of stuff teenagers go through, then they are being respectful of us as teenagers.

Are you respected at school?

> Everyone is accepted in our high school. Guidelines and stuff are enforced, but the staff accepts and respects the participation and effort people put into the school. If we want to be on the swim team, cheerleading or drama, it is fine, no matter how bad we are, as long as we try.

Can you give me an example?

> Sure, I remember one day I was in the office and my principal asked me if I knew someone who might do a particular job. I gave her a bunch of names. She went back, did some research and decided Jessica would do a good job. Jessica is a very bright, vocal person who will be in high school for at least five years. Jessica worked on the project and I think was better able to accept that she has to come back to high school again next year.
>
> Our opinions and voices are respected. That's a good thing. It could never be a bad thing, even if our opinions are really not that great. They're still our opinions. Sometimes we can't do much better.

Tell me more -- about this, being a teenager.

> Much of what I think of in relation to high school are just the stupidest things that people do -- the little things that, at the time, seem very, very important, but in the long run are really not. My high school is really good for people. Sure, some people can be intimidating, but you have to place enough importance on that person or value their opinion in order to be intimidated.

Is intimidation a big thing?

> Like, I was intimidated by Sheri because I wanted to hang around with the older people and go to the parties they were at. I placed enough importance on them to be intimidated. Generally, however, there is lots of tolerance and the school really explores a lot. It starts with an attitude of exploring in our classrooms. Then we become a lot more comfortable expressing ourselves outside the class.

You're comfortable, or do things get in the way?

> There's a lot of social control in high schools that is very subtle -- especially for girls. For guys it's just, oh, I'll beat you up and then it's like they're buddies. For girls it's little things that wear you down and chip away at you until you assume

> yourself to be inferior. Unless a teacher or principal follows you around every single minute of every single day, they won't pick it up.

You feel safe?

> I always feel physically safe -- I always watch my mouth. But, I haven't always felt emotionally safe. It can be someone just telling you to get out of their hallway or speaking to someone's boyfriend in the bar that gets awful rumors going. It can be like one word that ruins your day or one sentence that can ruin your life.

These hot issues, like safety, racism, social control -- is it important for schools to talk about them?

> It is really important and absolutely necessary for schools to explore issues around things like racial tensions. You get preconceived notions about people because of the way they look or because of the color of skin they have. In high school it is so easy to get contained in your own little bubble. You feel really safe, but you are cut off a whole lot from other things.

> The only reason that people are racist in high school is that people are ignorant and they don't bother to care. It's so much easier to gang up on certain people, or a certain person, just to make yourself feel better.

> When we get more information about different cultures, when we discuss issues, when we mix with a variety of people, we become more tolerant. We know more about them. We see them as people. Instead of wondering how those Indians did that hoop dance, we wonder how those people did it and how we might learn. I think that when people start to learn, then they can't be scared of other people.

Is there a lot of mingling -- different groups, ages, races, you know?

> Yeah, my best friends, like my best guy friends in the world -- three out of four are brown. And I see a lot of grade 12s hanging around with grade 10s and 11s. I like that a lot. When I was in grade 10 I met a lot of people in grade 12 just because they introduced themselves.

> Many of the grade 10 guys are very mature, but lots of them are just messy.

> We've earned our grade twelver-ship, but a lot of the grade 10s just don't realize this! At times it's hard not to be completely in contempt of them -- but they are probably very nice people.

So grade 12 is -- different, special?

> Grade 12 changes a lot of things and people change. Parties aren't as important as they are in grade 11 and hanging around with the right people doesn't really matter. Diploma exams are coming in two months and that's what is important. I'll just go out one night on the weekend because I've got to study.
>
> Things are a lot more final. All of a sudden it's very scary and I don't want to graduate. Twelve years have been leading up to this one moment of graduation, and now it is coming so close and I don't want it to come. The anticipation is a lot more fun than the actual event. Grad's a very expensive thing.

You looking forward to it?

> I'd be perfectly happy if this term kept going forever. I don't want to graduate. That's why people are changing -- it's so final. We don't have much option. It's now or never.

Hm.

> Sometimes, I wonder if high school would have been different if I'd known more when I started.

So what have you learned? Say, if you were writing a letter to a grade 10 student today, what would it say?

> What would I tell a new grade 10 student? I'd probably say:
>
> *When you come to high school don't take any crap from anyone -- not your teachers, not your principal, not your friends. You are who you are. It doesn't mean you can't improve, I mean everyone can always improve.*
>
> *Don't let people tell you that you're bad or worthless, and on the other hand don't let them tell you that you're God and you can do all these incredible things. Don't get a big ego, but don't go totally down on yourself either.*
>
> *You are who you are. Once you accept that and once other people accept that then you can really use your strengths. You know what your strengths are and other people will help you find them.*
>
> *Do things. Go on to a students' council. Go on to a team. Watch things. Just go out and watch a tournament. The more you put yourself out there, the more fun you will have.*
>
> *If you really want to make your high school worthwhile, start in grade 10 by accepting everybody else. Just like you want them to accept you. Don't expect them to change for you.*

> *Accept everybody. Accept your teachers because they're just there. They're just your teachers. They're just there doing their job and you don't have a lot of say. There's nothing you can really change about them. Same with your principal. Just accept — they're not there to make your life hell.*
>
> *If we could all figure this out in grade 10, we'd probably be happier.*

Neat, thanks for talking with me this morning

> No problem.

Hans

> *(Age 18) A young man with much ambition and an eagerness for learning. I participated in many extra-curricular activities. I was always willing to try new things.*

Hans and I met around his family dining room, enjoying hot muffins his Mom had just taken from the oven. I started by asking him what he tells his university buddies about high school.

> The one thing I recall telling most people about high school was the bike trips. They were well organized so you weren't really guessing what was going to happen. It was a small enough group and you got to know everyone. It was a well rounded atmosphere with people from every caliber of biking -- beginners to more experienced people. My favorite thing was when we went tobogganing with the crazy carpets down the mountain. Climbing a mountain and tobogganing in your shorts is just something you don't really ever get to do.

Anything else?

> You just don't think of a school field trip being as much fun. A couple of us were just best friends and everything we did, we did together -- ride with them, go into Banff with them, or cook and eat a lot of perogys with them. You just spent quality time with some adults and it made it more homey. You can really break the barrier, push it aside, and become a friend with the teacher. When you got back to school, it made it a lot easier, more relaxed. A definite plus.
>
> Some teachers just know how to make a field trip interesting. It's not just let's go, that's it, let's leave, and everyone back on the bus. Some teachers are there with you, talking, sharing something they learned when they were a kid, realizing something they learned as a kid was wrong, or just keeping things happening.

It makes a difference who leads these trips?

> It really depends on the people who are going on the field trip -- when some teachers are going you just want to go for sure. You know it's going to be funny, or you'll end up doing something different or unexpected, or maybe there'll be a little mystery about it.

Mystery?

> I don't want to use the word crazy, but crazy in the sense that people try different things and aren't rigid. It's almost that you know what to expect, but you know that somewhere in your mind something says, who knows what could happen. You go, just to see what happens!

Neat -- have you always felt that way?

> I never really liked school -- never liked elementary or junior high much. I just didn't enjoy it. High school for me was such a big change, almost like a break. It was like taking a big deep breath of air and all of a sudden everything's different, everything's better.
>
> I'd been confined and grown up with the same people since kindergarten. High school was a huge change because everyone's new. Basically, I went around and just got to know people. I met my best friend when I won some hockey tickets and asked him to go to the game with me. We started being good friends, and from there just became best friends.
>
> It was so interesting to have that diversity -- to always get to meet new people whether it was at lunch, through clubs, or through just going to class.

What was different, you or the school?

> When I came to high school, I came with the attitude that I wanted to meet a lot of new people. It turned out great. I mean, for the first time I'd know I'd better wake up today, because I want to go to class.
>
> I know from experience that a lot of people liked the principal and that sort of helped a lot with the school atmosphere because then people are more into the school. You don't have that I-don't-care attitude. If you're going to school, you like the principal, then there's that sort of happy attitude, you know.

Other factors?

I really can't express how much great teachers -- really good teachers with the right characteristics, great personality -- really helped my schooling immensely. Some teachers are just teachers -- they're okay people, but they aren't really nice, getting-to-know-you type of people. Lots, though, are just open with the students, they say what they want to say and have an open relationship basically with you.

So, so what makes a great teacher?

They're nice guys, but they're still strict. They instill those values that you have to do your work, but they still do it while teaching the class from a nice-guy perspective. They say learning is fun, but you'll still have to spend some time that probably won't be fun. They're interesting and always have a story to tell. It's like I've learned so much about them even just by hearing one experience that they've been through. Learning can be just so tedious and this really helps.

Some teachers have a good sense of humor, some have an okay sense of humor and maybe some don't have a sense of humor. I guess it depends on the way they were raised. You know -- whether they were a student of a teacher that had a sense of humor, or whether they were a student of a teacher that was strict and really monotone.

What do you mean -- sense of humor?

I think a sense of humor is not only making a joke, but telling the students something funny they heard, or acknowledging it when a student says something funny. It's not bad if a student makes a joke -- like it won't destroy the course.

Sometimes when there is a joke made about something you are learning, you really remember it. You don't remember everything for tests. I'd be sitting at a test and sometimes it would be those little jokes about a math concept or a chemical equation that would sort of pop into my mind, and I'd say, "Yeah that's it."

So humor is important. Other suggestions?

The whole idea of creativity isn't explored enough in high school. Like in English courses, creative writing could be a bigger chunk of it. It seems we get taught a format essay -- here's your introduction, here's your three paragraph body, and here's your conclusion. I find I haven't explored my creativity enough.

A creative story is your idea, you spend the time, you work on it, and it's something that's totally yours. I'm sure it is kind of like people climbing Mount Everest, only a smaller feat. It's so gratifying and you feel good about yourself.

So if you learn how to express your ideas, then writing them in an essay would be easier. If you keep writing, then by the end you almost feel like the essay is your

> friend. If people write about a personal experience in a fictitious story, it's a way of rectifying it. It's like a gateway to the soul, a way of relieving stress.

Nice expressions -- we should get you teaching this stuff! Hans will you tell what you've learned about adults in high school?

> When I saw adults before, it was always, I'm a kid and they're a parent. There was nothing more to it. I couldn't talk to them like I would talk to my friend, and I wouldn't consider phoning them. Even though we're close to our parents, there's still that big barrier -- we're their kids. But at high school I found that I developed good adult-student relationships.
>
> I've learned that I can talk to adults, learn a lot from them because they've been through more experiences, and I can almost steal their knowledge. Like a movie, you're looking at someone else's life experiences and saying that's funny, or I'd never do that, or asking did that work out?

They've really made a difference?

> For sure. In a sense it's like elders who you respect because they're a little more knowledgeable, they teach you, they're smarter, and they're accessible. You feel more like you can just go and learn from them anytime. It's great. It's like having an encyclopedia on your lap all the time.

That's a big responsibility you've given us! Thanks, Hans.

Jeff

> *(Age 18) Ruthless. I always watch what I am doing and never regret what I've done.*

Jeff and I met at his school twice. Once he brought a buddy along, whom we involved in this conversation. I have Jeff refer to him a few times in the following conversation. During our third conversation to confirm what I had written, Jeff chose to meet at a very public table in the food fair of the mall where he works. It was a location where both he and I were recognized by many people passing by.

Jeff began by giving me a bit of his educational history.

> I've been in three different high schools and if you count summer school, I've been to every south-side one. Probably the atmosphere was the most right for me at my last school. It was more laid back and I got to hang out with a big group.

So why did you leave?

> They asked me to leave. I think basically because of skips and little misunderstandings here and there.

Oh, -- so tell me why was it the most right for you?

> Being comfortable is a big thing in school. I didn't know almost anybody when I went to my last school. After about a month I started talking to everybody and then we got into this little scrap in the parking lot. The next day at school I couldn't believe the number of people that were there to help me out, in case anything happened. After that it just clicked -- I felt comfortable knowing nothing could go wrong. I felt elevated just hanging around with them. I felt more safe. I knew if anything ever went down, I'd have protection for sure.

So, maybe this is a dumb question, but what do you mean by -- protection?

> You need protection because today's society is pretty harsh. Even a wrong look at somebody could really spark something bad. If push comes to shove, it's good to have people with you. It's not really a gang, just friends, business associates, legitimate business men. It's like a family sometimes, people who'd be there no matter what. It's not really loyalty, it's more you scratch my back, I'll scratch yours. Favors.

So you talk about these as groups of friends. The media, they talk gangs.

> The media pisses me off. You look at the TV and there's this gang related violence, and more gang related violence, stuff. There's probably only three gangs in the city and one of them is just pathetic. The things that happen at high school, they're barely ever gang related. It's just a bunch of guys that just want some respect.

These groups, is it a color issue?

> I don't know if it's really a color thing. My buddy says on the outside it doesn't have to do with color, but seriously he thinks it does. He figures being brown has a lot to do with why most people we hang around with are brown. To me, there is something to that, but it's not why. The brown community is really tight and we're more pulled to our own color. Like our parents knew each other even before we met.

Talk a bit about these groups, say related to your school.

> A school can be looked on as a community type of thing. It's your standing, your niche, your status in the school that's important. Like a business man who

> establishes a good status, everyone knows he's powerful, he can get things done, and has lots of money. That's the same thing that people look for in schools too, and there's always certain individuals who are willing to go out and do that.
>
> My buddy had his power trip in grade 8 and 9. I didn't get a chance until grade 10 or 11. I guess I got power hungry, I started making the right connections, and made friends with the right people. I could have had stuff done, but I really never had the need to. But, I was in a situation where I knew exactly what was happening in every part of the city, even before the police would know it.

You're in grade 12 now -- has it changed?

> Last year there would be a little bubble around us when we walked around, even if we didn't ask for it. We were unified. I'm sick of all that gangster crap. I'm a different person from last year -- I don't even know when it came.

So, when you look back -- any regrets, learning?

> No, now that I look back at it, I don't regret it. I don't regret anything that I've done because it taught me so much more. I wouldn't trade it back for anything. I know about the laws now because to get around them, you had to know all that kind of stuff. When I walk into a room I know who to look for -- why is that person standing and all these people sitting? Your mentality is, be ready for anything.

Can you tell how things are now -- for you -- for school?

> Right now it's just so much fun at school. I can walk around and just every single person stops to talk to me. It's a big mosh pit type thing -- everybody knows everybody. It's comfortable. It's just a combination of things. Lots of windows -- it's not a dungeon. There's not a lot of competition. It's competitive in the academic sense, but not in the social sense. You can make friends easily and you don't really have to prove yourself or who you are. At lunch time you can go outside, go play pool, or just chill with all your friends. Teachers are approachable and that allows us to reach out more easily.

So what do you want from your school?

> Before all I wanted from the school was an office! I could care less. Now I want them to help me get to university. If I get my chem, I'll be satisfied with what I've got out of high school. And then there's the girl factor. The density of good looking girls is at our school. School's a place where students want to be. Even if I had four spares, I'd come to school just to relax.

How about teachers, classes?

You've got to see the human side of teachers. Then you can relate to them. There's one guy whose one of the coolest teachers in the school. He jokes around with us and lets us know he's not just a teacher. Half the other teachers are just there to teach you. They don't give you anything else.

If a teacher actually gives himself up to have a relationship, I bet any student would too. Even the way I was last year! It's not a necessity. It's something that the teacher has to initiate, because it won't make no difference to students if they're a teacher or if they're a friend. But if they're a friend, it's a bonus. And the teacher who's a friend gets way more respect. That's why I respect Mr. X., and other teachers, I couldn't care less about.

I am curious -- about safety, atmosphere, that stuff.

I don't expect my school to be safe. There's too many students and not enough teachers. You're more likely to get into a fight at school. In school people know who you are, they can bring your rep down, and they can make you look bad.

Even nowadays some students will come up to me and say, I got into a fight, can you help me out? I'll do that. Things like that make a better school if students help students out. Fights are totally resolved. If the teachers get involved, the students get more pissed off and one of them could get a nice beating.

We should just let them happen?

I was thinking about even allowing students to fight at school. If two people have a confrontation in school, they're going to fight one way or other, either inside school or outside. Outside of school it gets bigger, it gets more violent and you're allowed to do more -- like bring a bat or a bar. At school, if I get into a fight, I'd appreciate it if the teachers would let us fight it out because it could settle the problem right there and put an end to it. I wouldn't mind putting on gloves and going in a ring. It would allow students to settle problems. Outside of school it's going to be way more violent.

You really don't expect your schools to be safe?

There's no way that the school can be entirely safe, unless it's a prison. There's just no point in making it total zero tolerance. It works to some extent. But in extreme situations people won't recognize it and it goes out the window. The only way it's going to work is if they do locker checks every day on every single locker.

You say zero tolerance doesn't work?

> Zero tolerance works in a sense that if something goes wrong, then you're out of here! But if a school is more comfortable, it just won't reach that limit because it's such an atmosphere of comfort.
>
> I look at some of the little kids that are in grade 10 and there's no reason for them to be carrying a weapon. Mostly people just carry them to show off. They just wouldn't use it -- they'd be scared to use a knife. It's all for show.
>
> I've carried a weapon because I didn't know, at any time -- I could have been walking home -- and that could have been it. When I look back I hate myself for doing that. I just had no need for it. I'd say 99% of the people who carry weapons would not use them. I guess zero tolerance mostly stops the people that are just carrying them for show.

But not for those who'd really use them?

> Powerful people don't look to authority figures. They try to take the law into their own hands. Same thing with ratting. They wouldn't want to tell on somebody. It will cause something more serious. I remember a fight I was in once. If I'd ratted, he could have gone to jail. He could have got some serious charges. That would have been the same as probably killing him.

You weren't prepared to rat on him?

> Ratting would have caused just mass vibrations. He would have come after me just for ruining him so bad. Obviously, I wouldn't just stand there and none of my friends would just stand there. They'd come with me and then obviously he'd know, and more of his friends would come. Then, it would just end up being a big thing -- exactly what ends up being on the news.

But, you say things have changed for you now -- can you avoid all this?

> My buddy thinks you can avoid fights at all costs. That's his mentality. He's trained in martial arts, but says it is an art, not training to kill anyone.
>
> He says don't do this, man, just walk away. He doesn't want to get into it, because once you're into it, you're in. He's encouraging me. That's why I hang around with him.
>
> I'm on my way. If it wasn't for him, I wouldn't be studying for my diplomas.

Good luck -- hey!

Tiffany

> *(Age 16) I really like sports and have been on the basketball and volleyball teams. High school is a lot of fun for me and I really try to get involved in lots of different things. I do pretty well in school – I could study a bit more and get higher marks, but I'm getting all my credits. I like a balance of friends, family and other activities.*

Tiffany and I met at her school. We rescheduled a couple of times. She's into all kinds of activities and our meetings sometimes slipped her mind. When we did meet she shared with great enthusiasm. We were chatting about what she tells others about her school.

> I tell people, oh, I love my high school. It's so awesome. I've never seen anybody fight there and I've only seen one day where someone was yelling in the halls. But as soon as that happened, a teacher came in and said, "Let's chill out." There's such a wide variety of people in our school, but yet nobody really cares. You can have friends in any group.

Any group -- are your friends in any group?

> I haven't really thought about it too much, but probably most of my friends are preppy, so I would be classified as that kind of thing, but I don't really classify myself. Preppies are people who play sports and stuff like that. They probably listen to more rap and dance music. Probably they wear jeans, nice shirts, boots -- expensive clothes.

Are there other -- groups?

> Well there's Grunge and Alternative who listen to alternative music and more shop at Value Village. But then, I shop at Value Village and then I go and buy expensive clothes too. Sometimes when I see people, I say, "God why do they want to look so ugly?" But, I mean it is their decision so you've got to kind of overlook it.

These groups -- are you comfortable with them?

> I used to be actually intimidated and stayed away from people who smoked and went out to the smoking area. But they're really not bad people, you know. This year I learned that I can go and hang out with them and who cares if sometimes they go out and party, or smoke between classes -- it doesn't make them bad people. I'm talking to a lot more people this year and I'm happy with that. I would like to graduate with more friends than just one.

Neat. Tiffany you said your school is awesome. Tell me why?

> I think our school is really nice, atmosphere wise. When they bring visitors through it's kind of like you can show off how nice your school is. We've got all these nice computer labs, colorful colors, lots of windows, and nice paintings and artwork. I've never seen anything broken here or finger prints on things.
>
> I'm here after practice and I see janitors buffing the floors -- like everyday. It means we're taking care of our school and I think our school is worth it. The people in our school are pretty good people, and I think most of the time people try to take care of it. I have in a couple of instances heard people say, "Oh pick up your garbage, what's wrong with you?"
>
> The computers are really open to students and there's been very little vandalism. We don't have any reason to vandalize, and maybe there's some fear put on by the teachers that if we do vandalize, we're going to be in big trouble. We spend a lot of time here, so we might as well be comfortable while we're here.

Will you tell me about the adults -- the teachers in the school?

> I think it's really important to get a good relationship with your teachers or your coaches, because you're just a lot happier. You really respect adults in school because they're there to help you and help you learn. It's their job, but a lot of times I think they go above and beyond to make special advances in class just to make it funner. So many teachers do that.
>
> I guess teachers are pretty intelligent. A lot of times teachers care a lot about current events and stuff. It's more exciting talking to them because they know what's going on in your school and you're kind of involved more closely with them every day.

You seem to make connections with people. Do all the students?

> I don't know. I think a lot of time people maybe drop out of school or don't get involved because they don't like school. They're not happy. You've got to be relatively happy to want to work and succeed, and have fun with your friends at the same time. When teachers make you feel welcomed and treat you like a young adult instead of a student, you're not so intimidated and more comfortable talking with them.

You wrote that you really like sports. Tell me about -- sports and school.

> It's just a lot of fun being in sports. At practice, somethings just happen that are so funny. The coach starts smiling, then everybody else starts smiling and we can laugh or giggle for 10 minutes. When our coach finds something funny, it usually is. He tries innovative ways of doing things. We did this one drill where he made us roll somersaults and then get up and he hit a ball at us. It was just so funny

because we were just out of our heads, keeling over laughing, spinning around and stuff! He had probably sat up at night thinking of something fun we could do.

We pick it up. One of our players was playing with this thing they called a noodle in a pool when we were in Regina. So at the next game, another player brought her some Ichiban noodle soup and dedicated it to her.

Or it can be at a team meeting, and one person would say something funny, and the coach would say something back, and everybody would start laughing. Our coach is more part of our team. It's like he's not on the court, but he kind of is. He's sitting off to the side, giving us encouragement. It makes a difference -- a nice difference.

Sounds like fun. You really feel a part of the team?

Yeah, definitely. Like we had a really important decision to make at the end of our volleyball season this year. It was a team decision. We all talked as a team for awhile near the end of practice. Then our coach told us to go off on our own, think about it overnight and we'd have a secret ballot vote the next day.

It was a good process. It let everybody know what everybody else was thinking and striving for. I thought it was important for us to decide, because if the coach had decided we'd have felt, well isn't it our game and shouldn't we decide where we want to go?

Your coach seemed to think so.

The team's been really important to me. Thinking back it is because I was accepted and part of something.

By anyone in particular?

I'd probably say some of the seniors, like Michaela.

Let's say you were going to write her a note. What would it say?

Oh gosh, let's see. I'd probably say:

Last year there were just two of us grade 10s on the senior volleyball team. Thanks for making us feel really welcomed. You'd say come and play with us during practice and then in the halls you'd always smile at us and say hi.

You always just made everything fun at practice. You'd want to lead the run and then we'd all be running and having fun. Once in grade 10 I was watching you and Jenny setting. You were so good and my gosh I was kind of intimidated. I

> *didn't really have anyone to play with, and you said come play with us. I felt really welcomed.*
>
> *In grade 10, I noticed that you always had such a good relationship with the coach. I'd think wow, I wonder if I'll ever be like that. I'd think he sure does talk to you a lot. It's kind of funny, but now I'm in grade 11, it's the same way for me.*
>
> *I'm happy we got the championship in your grade 12 year!*

Thanks for sharing that. Anything else?

> Just that, it's really important to have a balance between friends and school and family. It makes you a lot happier person. If you're getting 90 in something but you're not happy because all you do is stay home and study, I don't think that is healthy.
>
> Me and my friends, we're all pretty good. I could study a little more, I know I could get higher marks, but it's not too bad -- I'm getting all my credits and then sports is really good too. I just think it's important, no matter what you do to try to have fun.

Well, make sure you do have fun. Thanks.

After talking with these young people I felt satisfied that they mostly liked school and thought it was a good place. The conversations however contained things that troubled me. More than once, I wished the young people hadn't been quite so candid with me. On second thought, it was nice they felt comfortable enough to talk about these issues. The conversations were filled with tensions -- some that were important and vital for growth; others that had potential for disappointment and destruction. It is these underlying tensions, that are the focus of the next chapter.

CHAPTER 4

TENSIONS: STRETCHING AND STRAINING

School's a good place

> And it was just their separateness they felt, not inferiority. They were from somewhere else, that was all.
>
> During the school day, on the other hand, there was no such difference. (Camus, 1995, p. 223)

> This was a good time for him, the happiest in his life he thinks now. Many see their high-school years the same. (Dryden, 1993, p. 122)

The message I heard from the young people I spoke with was that they generally liked high school -- not everyday, not every class, but overall it was a good place in which to grow and learn. Tiffany shared, "I tell people, oh, I love my high school. It's so awesome," while Victoria expounded, "I loved my high school. To this day, I love it." While they spoke of high school as an entity, Bill's and Jane's references were to a time. Bill said, "grades 11 and 12 were the best two years of my teenage life," and Jane related that "grade 12 was the best year of my life. . . . I had great friendships, had a boyfriend and everything was perfect. . . . I felt appreciated and felt rewarded."

Other messages were less direct, but that "liking" school was still evident. Hans saw high school as "the first time I'd know I'd better wake up today, because I wanted to go to class." "School's a place where students want to be," explained Jeff. "Even if I had four spares, I'd come to school just to relax!" Mark provided a mixed message. He saw high school as "just classroom time and then there's home time. I just never really took part in any of the stuff after school." His comment that "sometimes it can seem more like a jail than an education," reinforced a concept of school shared by Davies (1994) as "a jail with educational opportunities" (p. 21). Mark did, however, go on to say "I do enjoy school a lot more than I used to."

> I'd cry every night if I couldn't go to school and be with my friends, even if I complain sometimes. (Takashima, 1971, chap. 1)

Mangus shared a similar thought when he said, "all high school students say they hate school but actually we didn't mind being there all that much." He further commented that "high school was one of the most positive influences in my life so far. If I was rich, I'd contribute back to my high school because of what it gave me.''

What is this "high school" of which these young people speak? Is it understandable without being there, or without being a teenager? While talking about sharing information about her high school to new students, Victoria said, "they would not understand until they came and really saw what it was like." I wonder what she meant.

Underlying tensions

As adults there are many things we sense, remember or recognize that make up our image of a high school -- multitudes of athletic opportunities, exceptional fine arts performances and demonstrations, active service of students in their communities, meaningful leadership projects, studying for diploma examinations, intriguing science labs, and excellence being recognized at awards night. Indeed these are all parts of what a high school is. It is not all, however, as pointed out by Munro (1968):

> But what was really going on in the school was not Business Practice and Science and English, there was something else that gave life its urgency and brightness. That old building . . . was full of tension and excitement. (p. 150)

Several definitions of the word "tension" I referred to, related two ideas -- those of stretching and straining. I would like to reflect on what these young people told me in relation to the tensions of high school life -- tensions that are both healthy and unhealthy, tensions that both stretch and strain.

Much of the lives of young people is either intentionally or naturally hidden from adult eyes. I was troubled by Davies' (1985) description of a child, Cornish, who was being bullied at school. He described the teachers who patrolled the playgrounds as "ostensibly guardians of order, they were like policemen in their avoidance of anything short of arson or murder." Going on, he wrote, "questioned, they would probably have said that the Cornish child seemed to be popular; he was always in the centre of some game or another" (p. 71). The reality that we perceive in any one situation may not be the reality of others. Sometimes this difference in perception is intentionally arranged. Huggan (1987) wrote:

> Trudy and I kept up the pretense of liking each other for our mothers' sakes because they seemed so pleased to see their friendship extend into the next generation. But in truth we were bitterly jealous, especially in ballet class, each convinced she was better than the other. (p. 39)

Other times, it may simply be that we are unaware. Tiffany pointed this out nicely when she said, "I've never seen anybody fight there [at school] and I've only seen one day where someone was yelling in the halls." I am pleased that this is her perception, but as a principal who has worked in large urban high schools, it wasn't my reality.

How do we get beyond our own realities and perceptions? How is it possible to come to terms with the world of a high school, as seen through the eyes of young people? Is this something we even want to attempt?

I have often been fascinated by eyes. My work with photography pointed out the need to "focus on the eyes." When the eyes are wrong, the whole photograph is wrong. I studied one of my daughter's graduation photos -- it was lovely, but something was wrong. It turned out to be the eyes. A person's eyes tell so much more than her other facial or body expressions. As I have walked about schools I have noticed when the bright sparkling eyes of a young person become dark, almost black. The eyes gave away the fact that something had or was about to happen. Eyes are an important focus.

Dryden (1995) wrote, "you have to look into kids' eyes . . . because that's where *your* rewards are" (p. 205). Dahl (1975) shared Danny's comment on eyes. He said,

> I was glad my father was an eye-smiler. It meant he never gave me a fake smile because it's impossible to make your eyes twinkle if you aren't feeling twinkly yourself. . . . So watch out, I say, when someone smiles at you with his mouth but his eyes stay the same. It's sure to be a phony. (p. 9)

Our challenge, as principals, seems to be to use whatever is necessary to become aware and begin to understand the reality of young people in our high schools. Understanding the "eye" messages may be part of this.

I overheard two parents discussing an incident in a high school. One parent said, "my daughter thinks her principal is the smartest man in the world!" I was curious about this comment so I asked why. The parent related that a fight had occurred in the school. Five young people were involved and all five were given suspensions. However, two other students, who were not involved in the fight, were pulled from school and given home programming for the remainder of the year. Somehow, the principal knew what all the students already knew. The underlying cause of this fight, and apparently a number of other incidents, had been the two students who were pulled from school. The principal's credibility was tremendously enhanced by this action. He had somehow come to know and understand the subtle messages of the students' lives within the school.

What are these subtle messages? What are the underlying tensions in these messages -- tensions that both reinforce and question the basic message these young people shared -- that they both like and are happy in high school? The following looks at five tensions which I identified in my conversations with the 12 young people.

Academics

These young people described the tensions of academic achievement in a variety of ways. It was one issue that they all referred to with a real sense of concern and compassion. Academic achievement was important and was valued. I stopped to consider what Sizer (1992) wrote:

> "This place doesn't really value academic excellence. At least the kids don't. Serious students here are given a hard time. Kids don't respect them. They call them nerds, geeks," the young English teacher complained. (p. 67)

This was not a message I heard. I wonder too, that if it is expressed, is it that young people don't value academic excellence, or is it that they value it so much, and feel overwhelmed.

The tensions expressed varied. Victoria said, "in grade 12 there is a lot of pressure to get the marks to apply to university" and Rebecca passionately explained that "Diploma exams are coming in two months and that's what is important. . . . all of a sudden it's very scary." Michaela told me that she "stated" she wanted a particular teacher for Math 30 "being [that it was a] course I needed to get into university and I wanted a really good mark." She talked further about "getting really uptight before tests," while Hans simply said that "learning can be just so tedious."

Jeff talked of competition and said, "it's competition in the academic sense, but not in the social sense." It was competition for time that caused Jane's tension when she said, "you have to put your foot down and say I'm here to go to school and I can't do this!" Bill saw his teachers trapped in this competition for time and said, "teachers are on a very strict timeline . . . no matter what they do, all this material's going to be on a Diploma at the end of the year." As a result he too felt the pressure of time.

I heard about academics in relation to failure. Rebecca told of a friend having to accept that "she has to come back to high school again next year." Dryden (1993) powerfully wrote:

> Instantly he was behind. His body showed up each day to class and sat where it always sat; at home, his eyes still scanned the pages of his books, but no one was there. Within a few weeks, there was nothing left for him to do but put in time. (p. 122)

Two of the young people talked of working at overcoming this sense of hopelessness. Bill shared that he "failed three courses in high school, and was able to bounce back from two of these." He credited this to the confidence his success in music had given him. Keith told of "carelessly" taking the wrong science courses in grade 10 and then feeling "there wasn't much point going back" to take the right courses. He clearly knew, however, what drove opportunities. He said, "the schools [colleges] won't take you if you have bad grades. It doesn't matter how big a star you are."

Mark was perhaps trapped within this tension more deeply. While I heard him wanting to "just go to school and be a little book worm" and "wanting to get away from the hang-out life and do good at school," the pressures to not have this happen were very strong. He also spoke of the time spent in high school and suggested that "it's sad you don't get to drop out for a year, go to work, and come back." His advice to grade 10 students was, "you've only got three years, so don't screw up." Laurence (1974) shared a teacher's remark that Morag was "bright enough but doesn't seem to give a hoot" (p. 72). Like Morag, Mark was bright enough, and like Morag, Mark probably did give a hoot. Neither one, however, was prepared to show this.

Mangus shared his perspectives, which were perhaps his rationale for not achieving well academically. He knew he "could have pulled a lot more out of high school if I applied myself to the actual work." He went on to say, "in high school you don't really need to go ahead, because everybody's doing the exact same thing. You just need to keep up and get average marks." I wonder if he was alluding to what Davies (1994) called "real education" or learning "things you really wanted to know, rather than things other people thought you should know" (p. 140).

Finally I heard of the special tensions felt by students achieving well -- the pressure to do more. Tiffany shared that she "could study a little more. I know I could get higher marks, but it's not too bad -- I'm getting all my credits." Perhaps Carolyn's remarks most powerfully pointed this out. First, she said, "I'm not in any enrichment classes. . . . I like being mixed in with other people a lot more, rather than separating myself from the rest of the school." She, confidently saw herself as the one with the power to be either with or separate from others. She went on to say:

> Students who don't do well are expected to do a lot in class to almost show that even though their marks are low, they're really trying. Because my marks are higher, I don't have to prove to the teachers at all that I am trying.

Unless it seems, she doesn't meet their expectations. She told me "if for some reason I don't do as well as I usually do on a test, the teachers are generally disappointed." Carolyn found this attitude disappointing, and perhaps despaired at the fragility of her academic record.

Each of these young people clearly shared with me the desire to do well academically. Some had both the ability and opportunities to succeed academically -- some didn't. Very humanly, Dryden (1995) wrote:

> I came to realize, however, that the most fundamental distinction between students is not their race or sex or religion or family income, but between those who *get* it and those who don't, and kids like these are present in every school, in every classroom. (p. 5)

Interestingly, the young people who I spoke to all felt a tension, a tension related to academic achievement, whether they "got it" or not.

Relationships

> A bosom friend -- an intimate friend, you know -- a really kindred spirit to whom I can confide my inmost soul. I've dreamed of meeting her all my life. . . . Do you think it's possible? (Montgomery, 1908, p. 57)

> Only once did I see two people dancing what you might call together. They were both boys. Not touching, mind you, but definitely moving within each other's orbit.
>
> I remember how hard it used to be to ask a girl to dance. Maybe it has gotten harder. (McLean, 1992, p. 108)

"Relationships are the main thing in high school because you meet so many people," Michaela told me. Her statement, although being very neutral, opens up a huge set of dynamics and tensions which all these young people addressed. Hicks (1997) said:

> An overwhelming majority of adolescents have told us that the most important reason for coming to school is being able to be with friends. And these were not necessarily disaffected or failing students; often they were above average achievers. (p. 19)

I heard young people delight in friendships for many reasons. Hans shared that "a couple of us were just best friends and everything we did, we did together" and Carolyn started our conversation with "I do just about everything with friends." Part of Victoria's exuberance with her graduation was that she was "graduating from the school she loved with the best friends she ever had." Friendships were valued in different ways -- Carolyn saw friends as "people who kind of understand where you're coming from." Munro (1968) wrote, "I found that I was not so frightened, . . . I had my own plans. . . . I was on my way to have a hot chocolate, with my friend" (p. 158). Victoria, too, counted on her friends to help her develop confidence and she said they "gave me the power to just rise above whatever was holding me down." Some of Michaela's most profound learning during high school related to who she could count on as a friend. She shared that "you go into high school probably thinking that most people are trustworthy, but you have to learn who is and who isn't, who wants to help, and who really cares." There are tough lessons to be learned through dealing with friendships. Marshall (1993) wrote about this so well -- "falling out of friendship, I was to discover, when it was as complete as my friendship with Alison, was as difficult and painful, as much against the grain, as falling out of love" (p. 48).

Male-female relationships certainly came up in our conversations, but not to the same extent as general friendship. My observations of life in high school would support this. While it may not be a young person's first choice, it is perfectly acceptable for a group of girls or boys to go somewhere together, and even dance together at a school dance. Generally the young people I have observed would not "willingly have gone out with the village idiot, had there been one, rather than not go out at all" (Laurence, 1963, p. 193). They showed infatuation, yes -- desperation, no. While Keith talked of guys fighting because someone had kissed their girlfriends and Rebecca told of rumors starting because you talked to someone's boyfriend in the bar, the need for a boyfriend or a girlfriend wasn't a big issue in my discussions with these young people.

Bill had a girlfriend in grade 12 with whom he spent a great deal of time. He commented, "I don't know if it's having a girlfriend that's important, or just a good friend. . . . somebody really close that I can share everything with." Jane liked to separate the parts of her life, and wouldn't go out with any boy who attended her school -- it became too overwhelming. Michaela had several boyfriends in high school, but presently seems happy to have a number of friends who are boys. She learned about trust and became cautious through boyfriends. She told me "when you go out with someone and realize afterwards that they weren't as great as you thought or you learn they aren't as trustworthy as you thought, it gives you a kick in the face and you start to be really cautious." I heard these young people share thoughtful and personalized perspectives on male-female relationships. However, for fear of giving too serious a perspective on this issue, I know that in all high schools there are both males and females sharing thoughts with each other similar to Vanderhaeghe's (1982): "Just crazy. I'd watch him in the hallway, you know? I traded lockers . . . just to get closer to his. . . . I worshipped him" (p. 95).

Many of the young people talked about groups of people in their schools, but not about cliques. Cliques seem to be "closed," groups are "open." Cliques were in other schools, not theirs. However, the comments were interesting, and implied something simply because they were mentioned. Tiffany said "there's such a wide variety of people in our school, but yet nobody really cares," Carolyn pointed out that "definitely there are groups of friends that are closer, but nobody has problems being friends with other people," and Michaela shared that "it's more like you're friends with who you want to be, and there's nothing wrong with who you choose to be friends with." Certainly there were groups -- Mangus was "a Prep in grade 11 and in grade 12 he was Freak Boy" and Tiffany's friends were mostly Preppy, "so she would be classified as that kind of thing" -- groups that showed both respect for and acceptance of others. It was the sense of surprise that accompanied these comments that made me wonder about their significance. Why was there a need to comment on their freedom to select who they wanted for a friend? The pressure to be seen with the "right" people is familiar to most of us. While being aware of and respecting this pressure, these young people were generally willing to go beyond it and comfortably make their own choices.

Groups became a bigger issue when they divided down racial lines. A teacher in the CEA Report (1995) said:

> I see friendships on an individual basis among students of different cultures and backgrounds -- quite close friendships, but we've had discussions about this and students say, "Yes, Miss, but when push comes to shove I go with my own group." (p. 157)

The young people I spoke to would confirm this. Hans spoke of it being interesting "to have that diversity -- to always get to meet new people whether it was lunch, through clubs, or through just going to class" and Bill said, "you actually realize that no matter what grade you're in, you fit in, . . . you have the same interests." Dryden (1995) spoke of the "many obvious divisions among the hundreds of kids" and said, "day after day they do demonstrate towards each other at worst a benign indifference, a tolerance, maybe even an acceptance; at the best, a willingness to live together" (p. 124). Jeff spoke of his buddy who "figures being brown has a lot to do with why most people we hang around with are brown." Keith, who generally was calm, told of someone calling them "niggers" and he said, "I just lose it. I don't know why, I just do." Much of my conversation with Mark focused on racial issues -- issues he was trying to figure out as we spoke. One of his conclusions was, "I don't know -- blood's stronger than friends, I guess. We stick together. We stick with our own." High schools are places where we see relationships of all kinds developing and being nurtured all the time. They are places where issues of racism are being explored, information is being shared, and young people are discovering they are more alike than different. Generally I found it very good. However, the one thing that could turn it bad in unexpected and unpredictable ways related to people's physical differences -- differences based on skin color.

> When we were not doing school work, we were occupied most of the time with the garnering, passing on and discussing of sexual information. We had made a pact to tell each other everything. (Munro, 1968, p. 149)

Rebecca shared that much of what she thought about high school were "just the stupidest things that people do -- the little things that, at the time, seem very, very important, but in the long run are really not." Relationships generally are about the present and about a lot of little things. They are transitional to some extent. They involve influence. Rebecca spoke of the strong influence her relationships had on her. She felt her own personality was "a reflection of the others" around her and directly stated that "part of being a teenager is that you reflect what you're supposed to reflect at that point of time." This could be both positive and negative. Tiffany and Jane spoke of their admiration for older students who both accepted and invited them into their lives. Tiffany's acceptance by the senior players on her volleyball team who "really welcomed" her, who "smiled and said hi" in the halls, and who invited her to "come play with us" during practice, was significant to her experience in high school. Jane's work with the students' councils was encouraged by two older girls who "were like mentors and I could look up to them."

Others struggled with the influence of relationships. Keith told of that "peer pressure thing," the invitations to "come on, let's skip," and how it "just keeps going on and on." It wasn't until he was in grade 11 that he dealt with "peer pressure by thinking about football." A personal goal, the desire to accomplish something, overrode the pressure of relationships. Mark talked of "eight people on different days would come and ask if I wanted to skip" and how "it's a lot harder to say no when the chance is presented to you." Almost all of the young people I spoke to saw high school as a time of resolving the tensions presented by their relationships with others and their own personal needs to be themselves.

The CEA Report (1995) said:

> Small schools can create this sense of community more easily because of their size; large schools take formal steps to involve students, decentralize structures, personalize services, and create communities within the school. (p. 275)

All of the young people I spoke to were attending or had attended high schools of at least 1000 people. The community of their school was the context within which many of their relationships were formed. Bill's relationships were almost entirely based in the music community within his school. The others based their relationships in a variety of informal and formal settings within the larger school community. A large school provides many opportunities for relationships, as shown by Mangus who said "I don't think I'll ever be in a situation where I'll make that many friends again at one time." Jane found grade 10 simply wonderful as "every single day I got to meet so many new people."

It didn't happen for everyone, however. Tiffany alluded to people dropping out of school or not getting involved because "they don't like school." She then went on to almost define liking school as "being happy," wanting "to work and succeed," and having "fun with your friends." Mark's core relationships were really external to the school. He didn't "take part in any of the stuff after school" and he wondered if "that might have made a difference to me." The NASSP Report (1996) stated:

> Students take more interest in school when they experience a sense of belonging. . . . When students become invisible and melt into their surroundings, schools lose the opportunity to engage them fully in academic life. (p. 46)

Jeff spoke of school as a community and said, "it's your standing, your niche, your status in the school that's important." While this begins to move into the area of power, which is the topic of the next section, it also points out the role relationships play in the lives of each of these young people. If it came down to one basic need all these young people had, I believe it would be to have at least one good friend who is trustworthy, who cares, and who they could share everything with. Bill found his first year of university lonely -- loneliness that is best described in his own words: "I made friends, friends that are still back at school while I'm at university all by myself." He was missing that sense of being known, which was nicely described by a student in the CEA Report (1995) who said. "It's Friday and I'm going home and people are saying, 'Have a nice weekend, Sue.' That's real cool" (p. 145).

Power

> It was me and Nathan. We had some words on the weekend and I didn't know what was going on.
>
> Then during the week I was walking down the hallway, and Nathan stared at me like, you know, there's no tomorrow.
>
> I'm like, he's not staring at me? He wouldn't do that, he's not that dumb. He's probably looking at something else.
>
> So I kept walking.
>
> Second time I saw him, like he was giving me that dirty look, right? And I went, no, no, it can't be. He's not that dumb to give me a dirty look.
>
> The third time he did it, we were in the Caf area. I was alone, he challenged me. He put his fists up.
>
> And, I was like, what's going on here?

> By chance, I just turned around and everybody was there, like Darren and Tom, and like everyone. We were going to finish him off.
>
> We looked around and our principal came around the corner.
>
> Like nothing happened, but the way we were, even that look would have caused a fight.
>
> He would have got a nice beating right in the Caf. (Conversation with a student)

The struggle for power, for definition as a person, for acceptance and for permission to be yourself underlies much of the tension in high schools. Every student struggles with some aspect of this. A "look" was described above. What is this look all about? How would you ever recognize it?

Dryden (1995) wrote, "and in a high school, face is always at risk. . . . Trouble never more than one wrong look away" (p. 106). Laurence (1974) described the look:

> She and Christie walk up the cement steps. Forty miles.
>
> LAUGHTER? Why? She turns. Many laughers. All around. On the steps and on the gravel. Large and small kids. Some looking away. Some going ho ho har har" (p. 39).

Ricci (1993) was introspective about this when he wrote "the fear I carried always now that behind every simple gesture was the threat of some new humiliation" (p. 59).

The first time the "look" really had impact to me was in a Social Studies 13 course I taught to a group of very reluctant learners. The class was almost entirely boys, except for three girls -- three girls who it seemed to me should have loved the opportunity to become friends. Instead it was two against one -- one who hated the other two, or two who hated the one. The morning a "fight broke out in the principal's class," I learned about the "look." Two girls had simply looked at the other girl, and physical violence broke out. On the surface, it made no sense, but it happened. Behind that look was humiliation, fear and danger. The look had made someone feel she had no power, and therefore the need to react, to save face. Mark very bluntly put it: "like if you don't want to get stared at, then don't stare at me." Upon further reflection there may have been more to it -- related to Ricci's (1993) thoughts. He wrote, "[I was] angry that I'd been grouped with people like George and the Belgian girl, that Sister Mary didn't see how we all hated each other, hated having our strangeness multiplied and reflected back at us" (p. 57). I am sure this made up part of the dynamics of these three girls. None of them felt good about themselves, and each time they saw the other, they were reminded of their own short-comings, their own personal histories of fear and grief, and their own sense of anger coupled with humiliation. Their desire was not for acceptance from someone like themselves -- it was for acceptance from those who they saw were acceptable in the eyes of others.

Since that time I have tried to be more aware. I am better at recognizing the look, more by the tension in the air, than by any physical action. Being in a high school has helped me predict a pending physical encounter which so often follows the look. I think I was a constant frustration to those I worked with, as I would insist that we be alerted to, or follow-up on nothing more than "a sense in the air" that something was about to happen. Sometimes we were able to fend off the physical encounter, sometimes we were not. Other times it moved beyond the school. As Mark wisely told me, "fights can start anywhere. They may not end in the school." "When they end somewhere else," Jeff said "they get bigger, more violent and you're allowed to do more -- like bring a bat or a bar." He went on to talk about powerful people "who don't look to authority figures." They try to take the law into their own hands.

What do young people think about this? Those I spoke to had a variety of thoughts. Michaela didn't think much about her own safety. She felt "most people who get themselves in trouble situations have done something to provoke it." She kept safe by minding her own business. Mark was more concerned. He said " you've got to worry a bit about your safety. It's dangerous out there and guys don't fight one-on-one." Safety, at least partly, related to being in a group. Jeff expressed the need for protection "because today's society is pretty harsh." He talked of making the right connections, of favors, and that he "didn't expect a school to be safe." Jane related it all back to her increased self-confidence. In comparison to her junior high school experience, she said that in high school, "I never thought I would not be safe. I didn't need to walk with a group from class to class." Their responses seemed as varied as their experiences.

Young people achieve a sense of power in a number of ways. Munro (1968) wrote about one of these. "This Mason Williams was one of the heroes of the school; he played basketball and hockey and walked the halls with an air of royal sullenness and barbaric contempt" (p. 153). Mangus did outrageous things, usually for himself, but sometimes "just to see other people's reactions." His safety was ensured, he said, because rumors were spread about him being "very, very chemically unbalanced!" Bill's power and also his sense of self were described when he shared, "I remember one concert I had no breaks because I was in every single group that was playing." Victoria, while planning graduation, achieved this through "a lot of talking and a lot of give and take." Keith very bluntly spoke of there being "a bit of an ego thing being on a team" and further that "the girls will smile at you and you'll play good." Generally, this was healthy, developmental activity, enhanced by excitement and unpredictable actions.

Intimidation as related to power was evident in our conversations. Rebecca found some people very intimidating, but came to realize that to be intimidated, "you have to place enough importance on that person or value their opinion." It was hard, however, and she described the social control as subtly being able to "wear you down and chip away at you until you assume yourself to be inferior." It was like "there was something mysterious the matter with me, something that could not be put right" (Munro, 1968, p. 155).

These were tough lessons. Atwood (1988) wrote "because we want to play with her more than she wants to play with us, she gets her way in everything," (p. 52) and Marshall (1993) spoke of May who "could inspire such devotion without seemingly doing anything about it" (pp. 41-42). Tiffany shared that she "used to be intimidated and stayed away from people who smoked." She had since decided to try "hanging out with them" and realized that just because they go to parties or smoke between classes, "it doesn't make them bad people." Both of these young people worked through a sense of personal discovery. Perhaps, humorously, this all happened in the context of a high school where Rebecca said "we've earned our grade twelver-ship, but a lot of grade 10s just don't realize this!"

These young people were coming to terms with the tensions of power they daily encountered. They were starting to accept themselves for what they were, and not for what someone else thought they should be; they were realizing that fights were generally opportunities for one person to "look bigger in front of their friends" (Keith); they could see that everyone wasn't against them all the time; and they were attempting to see other people for what they were, and not as images of themselves. These tensions are not unique to schools. They are tensions that issues of power evoke in all parts of society -- tensions of which these young people, along with many of us, are trying to make sense.

Being a teenager

> We're people who are almost adults, we're earning the good stuff that comes with being an adult but we also want the freebies. (Rebecca)

> As, teenagers, they've seen and done and read many things, they are old enough to know more of what the world has to offer and are not yet old enough to know its terms and conditions. (Dryden, 1993, p. 122)

In Sherman's (1996) work about very young children in schools, she posed the question, "Is school really for children as they exist in childhood, or is it simply a vehicle to take them into adulthood?" (p. i). While not directly asking this question, many of the young people I spoke with asked us to consider just what it was like to be a teenager. It was not the same message from each of them, but it was consistent in its request to understand the tensions teenagers feel about being neither children nor adults.

Dryden's (1993) description of Matt pointed out the dilemmas of understanding teenagers.

> Matt, fifteen, is at that awkward age, old enough to do what he wants, yet young enough to do what *you* want him to, and big enough that he can. So more is expected of him at just the time that with more going on in his life, he wants to do less. (p. 15)

He went on to say, "[his] energy has gone into growing, developing, changing, to complicated internal things you'll never understand" (p. 21). Rebecca referred to this as "the mind-numbing vortex of stuff teenagers go through." Without attempting to suggest I understand all of this complexity I'd like to share some of the insights I have gained from those young people with whom I spoke.

Michaela set a context for this discussion. She saw high school as a "very hard time for a lot of people." She talked of growing up and "trying to figure out what we want to be." She told of "making mistakes along the way" and of the need for "support and encouragement." High school is a time when "we are not adults yet, we're trying, but we aren't" (Michaela). She asked that "teachers remember how they felt being a teenager." Perhaps part of her request was to understand that "much of the learning of young people occurs outside the school and that it has credibility" (NASSP Report, 1995, p. 50).

Three of the young people with whom I spoke, talked of the illusion of one's exterior appearance. Mangus said, "even when I started to change outside of soccer, soccer didn't really change for me." Rebecca spoke of a teacher who accepted that she had become "just a little geek" but who didn't "blink or bat an eye" as long as her "art was still the same." Both of these young people alluded to trying to keep a sense of stability in their lives at a time when they really wanted to explore and create new selves. Keith's comments about an interaction he had with a teacher over a school ball, forced him to think about something differently for perhaps a first time. When he said, "I could think it was racist or I could think he was just protecting the school property. I don't know," it seemed he was questioning a deeply rooted feeling that people were out to get him simply because he was black.

The child-teenager-adult transition wove through a number of conversations. Tiffany wanted her teachers to treat her "like a young adult instead of a student" so that she and others would "not be so intimidated and more comfortable talking with them." Similarly, Carolyn felt "a lot of times high school students are more grown up than the teachers give them credit for." Rebecca saw this differently. She saw a clear distinction between being treated as an adult and as a teenager. Being treated as a teenager included taking into consideration that "I don't know what I'm doing," "assigning roles that are manageable," and "respecting that we can't do things that adults do." Perhaps because of different experiences, perhaps because of different needs, Carolyn felt that she'd "never found that teachers treated us too much like adults."

These comments seemed to be about young people wanting to be something else, but realizing that, the something else may not be all they imagined it to be. Rebecca's realization that her feeling that adults always "knew what they were doing" was "probably completely untrue," reminded me of a few pieces I have read. Laurence (1963) wrote about leaving home saying "and yet in some way which I could not define or understand, I did not feel nearly as free as I had expected to feel" (p. 203). Anne (Montgomery, 1908) pondered this issue:

> And somehow I don't want to use big words anymore. It's almost a pity, isn't it, now that I'm really growing big enough to say them if I did want to. It's fun to be almost grown up in some ways, but it's not the kind of fun I expected, Marilla. There's so much to learn and do and think that there isn't time for big words. (p. 255)

I found it refreshing the way both Mangus and Jeff looked back on their past few years. In both cases there seemed to be a healthy acceptance of themselves and that their actions had provided them some valuable learning. Mangus shared, "I could have easily done high school, been out and still had the friends, but at the time it wasn't what I wanted." I wonder if the last portion of his statement is not one of the most difficult messages for adults to accept -- "at the time it wasn't what I wanted." It just isn't an acceptable reason in most of our adult worlds. Jeff emphatically stated, "I don't regret anything that I've done because it taught me so much." I find these comments to be some of the most hopeful messages I heard from these young people. They had made choices, acted on them, and were now ready to move on. I wonder if this ability to accept our past actions and simply move on is not a characteristic young people may be attempting to rekindle in adults.

Jane and Victoria were very direct in talking about high school as a time of choice and transition. Graduation was important to Victoria because it celebrated her grade 12 year which she described as "going from a childhood world into an adult world." Jane saw high school as the turning point that "determines what's going to happen for later in life." It was the time when she realized her need for balance to make her "a completely happy person" -- a time of moving from feeling "I was never comfortable for a minute" to a time when one could begin to believe there was "nothing the matter with me after all" (Munro, 1968, pp. 149, 159).

Influence

> Students are close observers of schools. They have a great deal at stake and they often have strong opinions. . . . It [active involvement] is demanding and complex and may threaten some adults. (CEA Report, 1995, p. 172)
>
> He was a Natural Hero, not a Student Council type of hero bound for success beyond the school. (Munro, 1968, p. 154)
>
> I reflected that athletes always seemed to know more than the rest of us about the school as a building; they knew where things were kept and they were always coming out of unauthorized doors with a bold, preoccupied air. (Munro, 1968, p. 156)

The tensions of influence found in a high school are many and varied. Earlier we talked of power, which I generally related to power with and over individuals or groups. This discussion of influence will consider issues young people raised in relation to their role in the decisions made that affect their entire school. It is about influencing the broader context of their schools -- the places where they daily meet, learn and grow. Some of this was very formalized in the form of students' councils and forums on school issues; others were very informal and were seen through personal questioning of one or two people, or through the unauthorized actions of "natural" leaders in the school. Whatever the source or mechanism used, I did hear young people express a need to have some influence in what happened in their schools.

The CEA Report (1995) stated:

> Student councils exist in virtually all these schools, but most occupy themselves with social arrangements, dances, athletic events, special projects, and, sometimes, fund raising for the school. (p. 170)

Several of the young people spoke of involvement in or awareness of councils related to student activities. Carolyn shared that "the extra fun things are mainly where all the student leadership goes." While she was very positive about what they did do, she went on to say, "they don't have much influence as far as the big issues. Nobody has any say really, except the principal." Mangus saw the influence of student leadership more far reaching. He spoke of being on the Students' Council and a strong foundation being established in grade 10 and 11. This, he felt, set a tone for new students -- "they had no choice whether they would be happy or not." Jane strongly believed that voicing her opinion on school issues was her responsibility and that she "had the right to know." Because of her considerable involvement in the Students' Council, she found it "was not such a big deal" to express an opinion about a larger school issue. Bill told me that he "didn't feel really involved in the student union issues," but he felt he had "some say in administrative issues." While giving me a number of mixed messages, these young people's comments clearly point out both their awareness and their desire to be part of both traditional student leadership issues and the bigger decisions of the school. These were not the same. An active Students' Council did not necessarily relate to young people feeling they could have impact on the overall direction of their school.

Victoria made an interesting comment when she referred to her high school as "a modern school." She further defined this as one where "students had input into decisions." While she talked of being involved in several formal input groups, such as the Grad committee, her reference to input went beyond that to include the ability to influence core issues in her high school. The NASSP Report (1996) stated:

> We see merit in including students on various committees that determine policies that affect, say, discipline, grade standards, and participation on sports teams. . . . Students should know that things do not "just happen" to them, that they can act to affect outcomes. (p. 32)

When young people spoke about their principals, they related a number of ways their ideas were heard in high school. Bill expressed a concern that there just wasn't enough classroom time to discuss school-wide issues. He recommended an independent time to do this, because "quality time to discuss school issues is important to us." Tiffany praised her coach for his involving them in an important team decision. She felt it was important to be involved and said it was "our game and shouldn't we get to decide where we want to go?" Michaela's need for student input was based on the fact that it was "their future and their education." She recalled a time when she was involved in school-wide planning and developed a whole new awareness of what teachers did. She shared, "it kind of opens your eyes as to how much teachers are actually doing." This nicely pointed out the benefits of input for both the individual student and the school as a whole.

Tiffany and Mark presented almost opposing views on why students might get involved in school decisions. Tiffany's remark that "we don't have any reason to vandalize," seemed to relate to the fact that she had had some say in how comfortable she felt in her school. Mark spoke of being asked for input on a smoking issue. Even though he wasn't happy with the present expectation about smoking, he also wasn't sure he wanted it changed. He said, "I don't have to get comfortable here," and went on to say "the hassle is almost a motive to get out." Mark seemed to understand that there was responsibility and accountability that went along with his involvement in decisions. He wasn't sure he wanted these. While not speaking of it, it may be that some of these young people felt they had greater influence on school decisions, through their informal actions -- actions that had both positive and negative ramifications on the schools.

Jane, no longer in high school, spoke of loving her life at college, but missed the feeling she had in high school, the feeling that she "had control there, and made decisions." There is no question that these young people wanted and expected to influence their schools. This influence, however, could occur in a variety of ways and really depended on the unique needs and engagement of each student. Formal structures did not ensure a student felt he was being heard; informal structures, also tended to leave people out. A variety was needed, a variety of mechanisms operating within an overall attitude that students should have the opportunity to influence their high schools.

Concluding thoughts: Bridging worlds

> Everybody forgot about me, and I played with Kapusitchka [the cat], and both of us watched and nobody said anything to me, except one man who said: Such a big boy to play with a cat. Shame. You'll forget everything that you learn if you play with cats. . . . And everybody hugged the baby, carefully, and then asked me how I liked my new little brother. I didn't answer, because I didn't know what to say, and then everybody laughed, and said I was jealous. I am not jealous. I hate him. (Klein, 1983, p. 234)

The worlds of children and adults are often distances apart. Perhaps because the worlds of teenagers fall somewhere in between, they are even more difficult to comprehend -- by adults, children or teenagers themselves. As educators we are challenged to use all our skills and powers, to tactfully and thoughtfully come closer to understanding the lives of the young people with whom we daily work and live.

Earlier I posed the question, "How is it possible to come to terms with the world of high school, as seen through the eyes of young people?" Personally, I have found it useful to recall situations in my own life, or in the lives of those I love -- situations where actions, based on lack of understanding, have been hurtful -- situations which have caused me to grow. Here are a few of my own stories, which perhaps start to help me bridge these worlds.

> My 16 year old son Matt has questioned why we expect him to go to church. Reluctantly he has continued to come, but on his own terms. His hat is one of his most valued possessions -- it forms part of his identity. If he is going to go to church, he is going to wear his hat.
>
> One Sunday, after a "reluctance talk" at home, Matt was in church. Just prior to the service, an adult came up to him, took the hat off Matt's head, threw it on the floor, and stepped on it. He then informed Matt, that "a church is no place for hats."
>
> His reluctance the following week was even greater. No one had acknowledged that he was in church, but someone had criticized his identity.
>
> ----------
>
> Thirty years ago, I was a student in high school. My hair was very long and I always wore my shirt tails hanging outside my pants. One day I was approached in the hallway by our Assistant Principal. He said, "McPhee, if you're going to be here, tuck in your shirt." I tucked it in.
>
> However, I then didn't want to be in that school. In my mind, I was overweight. The tucked-in shirt further exposed that. I had one more reason to feel inadequate.
>
> ----------
>
> During the years of my early teens we had a wonderful neighborhood hill on which we tobogganed almost daily in the winter. It was bare, it was steep, it was great for the daring activities in which we took part.
>
> One spring the city crews were seen planting hundreds of little trees all over the surface of the hill. We were devastated.
>
> The following winter, collectively, we destroyed almost every tree, by running over and breaking them with our toboggans.

> There was disgust from the adult population in the city. Today, the hill is still bare, and not cluttered with trees.

These three stories have similarities -- strong feelings, suppressed and open violence, and tensions within individuals to be both themselves and to conform. If we don't listen and only focus on what matches our sense of appropriate response, it is easy to lose the underlying feelings and desires. So often, in the young person's stories as in my own, compliance occurred but at what expense to personal identity? These students were actively constructing and then challenging their identities -- it was an enduring focus of their stories. We need to be more attentive to how tensions they daily deal with affect this process. We all have our own experiences and stories like the ones above. Perhaps they are within us for a reason -- one of opening possibilities for greater understanding.

As teachers and principals of young people in high schools our role is not to be carelessly dominated by the needs and the world of young people. Our role is, however, to be as aware as possible of everyone within each of our schools. Our awareness of others then allows us to gain glimpses of their realities, their tensions, and their dreams. It allows us to better balance the needs of young people as they are today, with their needs for the future. The student world within the high school is complex and filled with tensions that can both stretch students towards excellence and hope, and strain them towards failure and hopelessness.

As I listened to young people talk, there were times I wished they wouldn't tell me some of what I heard. I have often felt the same way in a high school, when I had poked my nose into some area and discovered something I would be happy ignoring. Certainly ignoring the world of teenagers is a possibility. We have been there, we know what works, and we know the route to success. Or we can be open to what we hear, what we see, and what we feel as we interact with these young people. We may never really know what it is that is driving each of them. We may, however, come a bit closer and through this closeness, come to thoughtfully understand the proper distance we should keep. Carrier (1991) wrote:

> There's a book called that [Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea] at school but the nun won't lend it to me until I'm thirteen. When you're that old, you have a beard and don't read books because you're chasing girls. (p. 142)

Perceptions -- they are so different. Are we ready to listen?

CHAPTER 5

DEAR TEACHER . . .

Rebecca, one of the students I talked to, told me the following things about giving and receiving feedback. She said, "lots of us aren't really used to talking to adults and to hear direct praise from adults is very difficult to take because we don't know how to respond." She spoke about receiving a note from her principal and admitted that, "with a note there is less pressure, and it is something you can look back on." "Praise is best when you can put a specific to it, a date, a place, a time and what you did," she concluded. "It works for criticism and praise, both ways."

I had many conversations with young people about the important adults in their schools. They shared insightful ideas and feelings that need to be heard by teachers, principals, and any adult working in high schools. I have chosen to present these through a variety of written and oral messages -- messages that probably were never delivered, but that speak to adults about what these young people value in their relationships with them.

The messages use the words and expressions the young people used in our conversations. I have pulled ideas together, sometimes from two conversations with an individual; at other times from three or four conversations with a number of young people. They have seen, read, and discussed these messages. Of all the material I shared with them, they were the most excited and enthusiastic about these -- I think, because these messages express what they would like to say to an adult in their high school who had influenced them. Returning to Rebecca, when she read the letter about her art teacher (see p.127) she was thrilled. She turned to me and said, "That sounds exactly like what I told the people from the television station when they asked me about her!"

Featured in the School Newsletter's "Teacher Feature" Column.

Teacher Feature

Ms. G.

You always offer a great teaching environment in French class and it helps us learn so much. We can go to your class and know that we're going to be entertained, learn a lot and have fun. We know we better get there on time because you just know it is going to be fun and you don't want to miss anything. Like a movie -- you never want to miss the first part.

We're all equal in the classroom. You could stand up front of the classroom and just start lecturing. You're more likely to pick up a short story, pass around a copy to everyone, turn one of our desks around and sit in it facing us, and go through it together. It becomes more relaxed. It's more of a conversation than a lecture.

You really try to make projects original or something that we all really want to do. It won't be something out of the book, so to speak. You actually find out what we'd like and what we'd enjoy. When we are working on a project we really like, we just want to learn everything about it. It's a big plus.

What we are learning is relevant to what we'd actually use French for. You bring in movies that help us hear pronunciations and accents, learn about culture, and are more interesting than what we can read. Unfortunately we have to put up with lousy stories when we read at our level of French.

The trips to France, to Quebec and to the Creperie downtown are really good.

Merci,

Bill, Hans and Mangus

Left at the front desk at 8:10 a.m.

From the Hands of Hans

Mr. D.,
I've never been in one of your classes, but you're one of my favorite teachers in the school.

You wrote that script for Star Trek, the Next Generation. I don't think it had been selected as an episode, but it was an actual script that had been submitted. I got to read it -- it's almost like an unpublished episode that no one else has ever seen!

I enjoy script writing and you would always talk to me about it. I don't know how we got talking, but it felt like I could talk to you any time.

It's great to know that there's someone like you, one in a million, who I can go talk to and ask questions.

You've just left me with a really good impression.

Keep trekking,

Hans

Mr. X would you please share this with all the teachers whom I've had. Thanks.

To my high school teachers,

Most of you have liked me actually. You didn't always like me when I was being a little shit, but you liked me outside of class. You were always giving me extra choices and just doing extra things for me. If I'd missed a day, you'd help me out. It seems that you did care that I get out of high school -- or maybe you just don't want me in your class again!!

Hey thanks,
Mark

Conversation, while waiting for a ride.

Jill: Were you in Mr. N.'s Math 31 class?

Victoria: Yeah, but I had the hardest time in Math 31. It was a class I really had to work in and it seemed that it was just a little beyond my grasp. I had no clue.

Jill: So what'd you do?

Victoria: Mr. N. told us about his brick wall story. When he went to university he got, like, 12% on his first math exam. He said, "Everyone hits their wall." Then he said that I could get this stuff because he'd seen me just look at something in the past and get it.

Jill: Did you get it?

Victoria: Yeah, eventually. I stayed after school a few times and he was really good about going over it, and over it, and over it, until I got it. That made a huge difference and it gave me the confidence to ask questions or get extra help if I needed it. I got over feeling it was just up to me, and I couldn't ask anybody else.

Jill: Yeah, I feel that way at times. He'd really help you?

Victoria: Especially around exams, he'd say come in at 3:30 p.m. and we'll work for a couple of hours. It showed he really wanted us to do well. Not just a small group of us, but all of us. I learned in high school that, hey, there are people who are going to help me, no matter what.

Jill: He seems like a nice guy.

Victoria: Yeah, and he'd always told us lots about himself. We were really happy for him when his son was born. We knew he was really excited. We were planning a gift, . . . but I don't think we ever actually got around to it. I feel bad about that.

Folded in thirds and hand delivered to Ms. E. after class one afternoon.

Dear Ms. E.,

You hold us really responsible for all our work. You remind us of assignments, but you don't come nagging at us like we're children. You let us know that if we don't hand in an assignment then our marks are going to be a lot lower. You kind of let us take it on ourselves.

You have the most disciplined class I've ever been in. But everyone likes it. Nobody's mind wanders off in class. Maybe because when they wander, you specifically ask questions to wake them up. You're a really interesting person.

Everybody is focused in class. You're very nice and friendly. You're not rude to anybody. You really welcome any ideas or anything that other people bring up. You kind of think them over in your head as to how the ideas fit in with what we're talking about.

It's English and there's lots of different ways to analyze stories. There's a lot of different ways that people can view things that go on. You're very flexible in seeing how things can be turned into one view or another. You don't have to think we are right, but you don't criticize us for being wrong. You seem to understand how someone might think something different.

Thanks for listening to my questions or the different answers that I come up with. You always discuss it and look at different points of view than your own.

Carolyn

Found in Mr. J.'s school mailbox.

Way To Go!

Mr. J.,
Just the time you put in was incredible. I want to totally thank you. In biology I went for help three times a week whether I needed it or not. You always just said, "That's my job and it's what I'm supposed to do."

You were just great overall. You said anybody that wants help, you'd be there. And you were.

I did really well in biology which I was proud of because that was something I needed for nursing.

Thanks Mr. J.,

Jane

Slipped under the door of classroom 27, folded and stapled.

Mark's marks

To: Mr. X.
From: Mark
About: Talking

I've never even had you for a teacher in class. You always seem to talk to me very human to human.

In the hallways, it's hi Mark. It's not just hi another student, just to be polite. It is really personal.

It seems we are talking person to person.
Thanks.

Attached to assignment – March 12.

Dynamite!

Mr. X.,
I can't believe it. You're so lenient yet you can control the class like there's no tomorrow. If you say it's going to be quiet it is. If you're talking and someone else talks, you just look over and that person's going to be quiet.

Still there's a sense of leniency in the class. We can talk to the person next to us. We can bring in food.

Total control, man.
Jeff

School Cafeteria: 2:15 p.m. -- Teacher farewell done by Michaela.

Ms. D., I've been asked to say a few words to you from the students. I've decided to tell you what you've meant to me. We hope you do really well in your new school.

Ms. D., I've had some really great teachers who have helped me succeed in courses. You are one of them. I haven't got to know you as well as some teachers -- I guess I don't spend a lot of my free time in the academic areas! You've been my teacher for Math 10, 20, and 30, so I have gotten to know you through class.

You know that I get really uptight before tests. You've helped me with my confidence by showing me that I do know the material and giving me suggestions on how to not be so anxious. You know the little things that bother me, like when teachers look over my shoulder when I'm working.

When I started in grade 10, math was not my forte and I was lucky even to be in Math 10. You were really good at explaining stuff. At the beginning I was very intimidated by the math and didn't do too well. As the semester moved on I started getting really good marks on some tests and it was all because of the encouragement you gave me. You let me know I could do it.

In Math 20, my semester was very busy and I didn't work as hard as I could have. It seemed sometimes you were somewhat, not really disappointed, but you knew if I tried hard enough I could do it. When it came to grade 12, I was kind of worried about Math 30 being a course I needed to get into university and I wanted a really good mark. I stated that I wanted you for my teacher! So far my mark is higher in 30 than it was in 10 and 20 and I feel quite successful. You're always there to offer extra help sessions and never seem to mind at all.

I know you want me to succeed and knowing that is very helpful. Right now I don't want to disappoint myself, and in a way I don't want to disappoint you because you taught me. I know I can do it.

The last thing I want to say is thanks for always asking us how your teaching is and if we'd be more successful if you taught a different way. I've given you suggestions and you've completely followed up with them -- like giving us harder questions in the review.

Thanks and I'll miss you.

Please slip this in Mr. T's mail box. Thanks.

Thank You

Mr. T., When I first met you at music camp I thought, this guy is completely nuts and his jokes are the lamest things in the world. I had no idea what you were talking about.

Then, on the first day of grade 10 that fall you found out that I was going to be in your music class. You looked at me, your jaw dropped, and it looked like you had just remembered where you'd seen my face before. That was sort of the starting point of our friendship and it grew from there.

I seem to like your jokes a little more now. A couple of jokes here and there loosen the tensions and that is really neat. You never mind if we laugh or look at you like you are crazy. You just have a good sense of humor.

I still think you are completely nuts at times, but you're pretty good at what you do and the class enjoys it. You have made my high school experience better. You know me and pushed me to do as much as I could in the time I had. Thanks. **Bill**

Diary Entry: 11:05 p.m.

I saw Ms. A. at the mall today. I really should talk to her.

Ms. A., You taught me in junior high so I knew you before I took English in grade 10. You just knew I was a little ahead for my age maturity-wise, so you treated me like I was a little bit older. Back then, I was the same age as everybody else. It felt like you treated me with a little more respect.

I felt probably the most comfortable in class talking to you and asking questions about stuff. Usually I don't even like asking for help from teachers. If I can't get it the first time learning it in class, I almost give up. It means I can't do it on my own if I have to go for help. It's like the class is beating me and I'm just not grasping on to it very quickly.

You're one of the only teachers that I felt comfortable asking for extra help. **Mark**

Memo to school principal, supporting a teacher's nomination for an Excellence in Teaching Award.

I wrote this because I think Ms. T. should be nominated for one of those awards. Here's what I would say to her. I hope she wins. Thanks. **Rebecca**

Dear Ms. T

You probably know me the best of any teachers because you've seen me throughout every single stage of what I've been. I think in junior high, people are sane and then in high school we become insane. You knew me in junior high when I never spoke and just studied all the time. Then you saw me in grade 10 when I had completely changed and I was just a little geek.

I wondered what you would think, but you didn't even blink or bat an eye. It was like you said it was fine if I wanted to be completely different, as long as my art's still the same. I was still the same person in your class.

Not a lot shocks you. You accept us, there are limits you set, and we don't have to impress you. You find the good in us and what we do. If I'd done something incredible with mud on a page, you would give me a good mark because I did something great with it.

You stretch us all the time with projects that can be incredibility hard to do -- drawing music or portraits in two colors only. Not only your evaluation, but your praise and criticism are based on how you know we can do deep down inside. You know me well enough to know if I've done my best.

Ms. T., you always treat me like a teenager. We see lots of examples of great art and go to lots of shows of adult work. You have always kept in mind that we are not at that level. You say it is not because we are not as talented, but because we don't have the experiences or emotional level that goes along with it. You understand that we're going to do our best. You know that being a teenager is kind of learning to be an adult. It's like a process, you know?

Finally, Ms. T., thanks for showing us that we can only be intimidated by someone if we place enough importance on that person to value their opinion. I remember when Cam would make fun of people in class. He was a very funny person, but you gave him no credit for making fun of other people. He had no control. You wouldn't laugh and you just ignored him. Eventually everybody picked up on your attitude. You placed importance and attention on people who weren't harassing others.

My art will always be important to me.

Thank you,

Rebecca

Returned to Physical Education Office with his uniform at the end of the season.

Gracias Thank you Danke Schon

Coach T.,

Now that basketball season is over, I want to say a few things. Man, you worked us hard!

Like that suicide drill when we got to run to the foul line and back, the centre line and back, the other foul line and back, and the end court and back. All in under 60 seconds. If we didn't make it, like in 60.1 seconds, you told us to do it again. Sometimes we would do five of them in a row and we'd be dead tired. You'd stop us, tell us it was a "mental" thing, and have us try again. We'd make it! Then you'd tell us to go shoot free throws or run through the offense. We just did it, because we respected you.

You're a big guy and when you said, do something, we just did it, no questions asked. We were kind of scared of you, but this was combined with respect. You had played for the U of A and you knew what to look for. If we had the potential to go on to the next level, like university or college, you had the knowledge to say what we needed to work on.

You knew what you were talking about and you were willing to sacrifice your time and money to help us be a good team. That's what I wanted.

Thanks,

Keith

Delivered by Canada Post.

Congratulations!

Mr. E.
Remember our first day of teacher advisor class? This guy, who was fairly big walked in late. You asked him if his name was Ken and he said calmly, "Call me Moose -- everyone does." That was grade 10!

We found out that he'd already been kicked out of two other high schools. You ended up talking to him, talking to his mom, keeping him on his toes and giving him encouragement he needed.

On grad night I ended up talking to you. I went up to you and said, it's good to see Moose here. You said, "Yeah," and seemed pretty proud of yourself -- to get Moose through high school.

You know, no one else probably would have helped him. I think you made a difference to him -- and to me. Thanks.

Bill

Attached to an assignment -- April 6.

Sensational!

Mr. X.,
Right now I'm hoping for a 90 in Chem 30. I just scored a 90 on the last big test and had a 75 on the little test before that.

When you handed out that test I got 90 on, I told you I was going to rock the test. You said I'd better, otherwise I'd be in your classroom at lunch hour for tutorials. I could tell you were serious. It was a big thing.

Thanks,
Jeff

e-mailed from the school library at 11:47 a.m.

Mr. R.

From: Carolyn
To: Mr. R.
Subject: Good Classes
Date: 11:47 a.m.

You always tell us lots of stories that kind of just fit into what we're learning. Most teachers wouldn't tell us all that stuff about their families or their daughters or their pets. But it seems it really includes everyone of us.

You joke around with everyone a little bit, but you won't do it if we don't respond or you know we are too shy. You know us on a more personal level but at the same time you can still teach us, without mixing the two.

Social class is great. You get everyone involved. I love it when you ask us a question and nobody knows the answer. Then you just make up some wild answer that has nothing to do with it, and if nobody figures it out, you know nobody's paying attention. It kind of makes us all pay attention!

Everybody feels comfortable with you. We can make some fun at you, and you don't care. It's kind of initiated by both students and you -- mostly you though!

Thanks.

e-mailed from home at 7:59 p.m.

Mr. M.

From: Jane
To: Mr. M
Subject: Computers
Date: 7:59 p.m.

I took computers throughout high school, but I still wasn't comfortable with them. Then we got a computer at home and I knew nothing.

You were great. It seemed every day, our whole family would write down these questions and I'd bring the piece of paper to class. You answered all the questions.

The discs never seemed to work the same at home. I'd bring them to school and the language was all different. The Encarta CD-ROM was so large that I found I didn't know what to do with it.

And then the printer problems -- there were constantly printer problems.

You helped the whole family because we didn't have anyone to get help from.

It wasn't your job, but you always helped me even if I didn't have a clue. And you were so patient with me. It was a good feeling.

Thanks.

Written, folded up and placed in drawer of his bed table.

Have a bright 'n breezy day. . .

Ms. U.,

I know you from before and I think you're a really great lady. I think you're almost too stressed out from what you're doing right now. I think you bit off a little more than you can chew because it seems like you don't really have time to be that nice lady that you used to be. You've always got things to do, and you look worried and stressed out and grumpy. Like I said, I've known you from before, so I don't hold it against you because I know you're a nice lady.

Just how the teachers present their attitudes, does change how we think about school. See you.

Mark

e-mailed from home at 9:47 p.m.

Mrs. N.

From: Rebecca
To: Ms. N.
Subject: Thanks
Date: 9:47 p.m.

You seem to understand us. We want you to accept us for who we are and we want you to be demanding because we are not going to get anything done if you don't make us. I feel comfortable around you because I think you've probably accepted me.

On the other hand you will not let me do badly. You'll give us hell if we do badly, because it's just not acceptable. I would much rather do nothing. Even though I'd be happy sitting and watching "Days" for the rest of my life, I guess it's what I really want you to do in school to make me work.

Attached to an assignment – May 12.

That's It!

Mr. X.,

Thanks for sitting down and having a little cup of coffee with us in the mall yesterday. We got to know you as a person, not just as a teacher.

I really like chem. You know what you're there for, you accomplish it and you do it in a way that's fun for us and easier to comprehend.

Thanks for talking.
Jeff

Hand Delivered.

Happygram

To: Coach F.
From: Tiffany
About: Wicked!

You come up to me a lot of the time and call me "Wicked One" or something like that. It's really funny.

Every time I walk by, you're always talking to somebody. Then you go -- "You know that girl there, she's so wicked and cool and stuff."

It's really funny the way you address people. It's almost like joking around like really good friends instead of a teacher and student kind of thing.

You really care how we're feeling -- not just how we're playing. You think if we're mentally ready that's as big a part of it as our skill level.

Once before practice you came up and asked if there was something wrong. You took the time to sit down with me and talk to me, even though you probably had things to do. After that day I just felt a lot better because some of the things you said just made me feel really good.

This is to say thanks for everything.

You're wicked!

Given to the principal to put in the receptionist's mailbox.

Happygram

Ms. L.,
You are a nice, big smile to see. Every time I come into the office you brighten everything up.

I walk in and if there's something for me, you just hand it to me, and that's pretty nice.

I don't know if you ever succeeded, but you told me your goal was to know every single student that walks through those office doors -- to know them by name.

I've really only spoken to you a few sentences here and there. In grade 10 you got to know me by asking a few small questions.

It never seemed like you were being nosy. You just have a way with us, that is hard to describe.

You're a bit more personal -- it's not, "Your mother called," but, "Mom called." You never really tell us what to do, just suggest things.

Bill

P. S. My parents said that they are impressed that they have to wait their turn before being attended to in the office.

They both think it is nice to see that kids are getting fair and equal treatment as they have often gone into schools and everything has stopped for the parents. **B.**

Hand delivered to the editor of the school newsletter, for the "Teacher Feature" section of next edition.

Mr. X. would be a good teacher to feature next month. Here's why I think so. **Hans**

> You know Mr. X. is very, very good at coming up with little anecdotes that are relevant to what he's teaching. Maybe something just came up in the news that related to chemistry, or that quick second or two of something funny is always nice. It creates a better atmosphere around him and less pressure. We go into class and we just feel happy. We think we're going to be learning, probably going to be amused, and probably we'll enjoy class.
>
> It isn't just sitting there going, how many more moles are there? He does things with a sense of humor. Instead of taking a little bit of dry ice and showing its reaction in water, he takes a bunch of dry ice, puts it in the big circle sinks, just fills it with water, and has all the bubbling and steam coming off. Everyone is just amazed and everyone knows that it's so cool.
>
> The analogy I'll use is this. If someone went to a mountain and brought you a rock, you could look at the rock and say great and just put it down. But if you go see the mountain, you go wow, I touched the mountain, I felt the mountain, I experienced the mountain. Technically you could learn the same amount from the little piece as from the whole mountain. That's what Mr. X. can re-create. He can re-create the mountain. He makes the mountain instead of the rock.

e-mailed from home at 10:47 p.m.

Mr. N.

From:	Hans
To:	Mr. N.
Subject:	Friendship
Date:	10:47 p.m.

You're really good at just being friendly -- we knew you were nice just from your smiling in class. You become one of the guys, in a sense, and that helps with learning. You make jokes, and when we're learning calculus and our mind is just getting fried, a laugh for a second can really help.

You don't try to separate yourself from the students. You're just very kind and go and talk to people if they need help. If I was struggling with something I could go ask you in a second. I just knew you'd help me whether in class, or contacting you though e-mail, or phoning you.

And also, the strict factor -- you keep things under control. We knew you were a nice guy, but if some person tried to take advantage of this, you'd put an end to it. We knew there's a line -- respect is what it is.

Before I had ever been in your class, I heard you liked Star Trek. So I went up to you one day in the hall and started talking to you. Within a week we were trying to organize a Star Trek club. You'd never met me before, but you put everything you had to give me a hand.

Thanks.

Mailed by Canada Post.

Congratulations!

Dear Ms. C,

We are really happy that you had your baby girl because you were always so excited about it.

Thanks for phoning our substitute teacher and telling us. It was kind of neat that you would do that, so we all knew.

I loved it when you would talk to us and tell us about your family and about babies and about everything. At the same time, you still taught us everything we needed to know.

I just loved chem.

You found ways to be almost like a friend with us, but still kept control.

I miss you,

Carolyn

Mr. Z. everyone is talking about what happened on the weekend. After class today I wrote this and I'm going to give it to Ms. R. I was kind of wondering if it might help us all if you read something like this over the intercom today. It sure made me think. Thanks for listening. Rebecca

Ms. R.,
You taught us a lot this morning Ms. R. I liked how you listened to what everyone was talking about when they came into class today and then you asked us all questions. You found out that Russ had been stabbed last weekend and has been in intensive care for three days.

Then you asked why and we had to explain. The more we talked about why, the more we could see how petty this racist thing is. Like, we had to basically say Russ got stabbed because a brown guy and a white guy didn't like being brown and white, and they didn't like the fact that each other were brown and white, and so ten people later Russ was stabbed and sent to the hospital and almost died.

We all started wondering, why are people doing this? You forced us to face this issue. I don't know if you meant to have us face it. It is easy to make things really macho, but when we had to explain it to you, it wasn't macho any more. It is just stupid.

Thank you.

Rebecca

Annual Athletic Banquet – A Tribute to one of the coaches, made by Keith.

Coach G., The first day I met you, you came straight on me and asked if I was looking for a scholarship. I wasn't thinking about it and said if it happens, it happens. Then when that scout came to one game you really pushed me.

You pushed me to keep my marks up, because you said when the schools called, they'd ask what my marks were. It seemed you cared. You checked my marks and watched my attendance.

You pushed me to work hard and learn at practice. If I was running with the team, and some of them were moving ahead of me, you'd say the little grade teners will pass you. Or if I was late for a practice, you'd remind me that other players were watching me and wondering how I'd get a scholarship if I'm slacking off. I had to prove to myself that I wanted it and deserved it.

Even though lots of football comes naturally to me, I had no idea how to play running-back. There was so much to learn, like the cuts, which holes to go through, following the blocker, and stuff like that. Because you have played football you could really help me. Because you played football, you had contacts with scouts and knew I had potential.

Because of your encouragement I worked harder and did better at everything.

Thanks Coach.

Attached to final assignment -- June 16.

Tremendous!

Mr. X.,

In class you relate things in terms that we understand. You didn't try to explain the theory of relativity in a mathematical sense, but in a sense that we could understand. You use things that are partial to us.

You tell us, this is going to be on the diploma this year -- you don't beat around the bush. You tell us exactly what to focus on.

It's your teaching methods. I sit there and it's as if you haven't planned anything for the day. You just do it off the top of your head. It just astounds me that something that looks so relaxed to us, is like premeditated for you. You've actually thought about how you're going to make it fun for students. That's a really big thing.

Thanks for a great semester.
Jeff

8:45 a.m. – Ms. L., would you please put this envelope in Ms. F.'s mailbox. Thanks.

9:55 a.m. – Ms. L., if that envelope is still in Ms. F.'s mailbox, could we have it back. . . .Oh, is Mr. Z in the office today? Could we make an appointment to see him?

Dear Ms. F.,

We have both been in your English class. We have both learned, but not as much as we could have. You're a very good technical teacher and you prepared us well for exams. We both did well on the diploma exams we wrote.

You had no friendship or camaraderie with the students in our class. You don't have our respect because you don't give it. How could things be better?

Sometimes your expectations weren't reasonable. We are not super human. The way you marked wasn't fair. Rebecca got a 68% teacher mark from you and a 87% on the diploma exam. In some ways it was motivational because you had to work your butt off to keep your mark up; and even if we slacked off, we did well on the diploma exam. On the other hand the teacher mark is as important as the diploma mark.

We need really constructive criticism, not just, you didn't do this right, you have to do that next time, and your next assignment is due in two weeks. How about, "Good ideas Mangus," or "Here are some things to work on, Rebecca," or "You could work on your sentence structure in this section." Personalize the feedback. It isn't always easy in a class of 30, but it is always possible with a little work.

Remember position papers are when we say what we think and then support this with facts. You can't have a wrong answer. Be more open to our ideas, and don't mark it wrong because you disagree with our opinion.

Finally, try to keep in mind who we are. Our course loads, the amount of homework we have, what's happening at home, issues with our friends, or the way our brains work. We aren't adults -- we can't write or do things like you would be able to do.

Your students,

Mangus and Rebecca

Handed to Mr. F. at the end of Volleyball season.

THANKS, You made a DIFFERENCE

Mr. F,

You just never give up. You won't take no for an answer. Thanks for not accepting that I couldn't play volleyball. Even though I can't catch, I wanted to be part of the team.

You'd joke about me filling in when someone was sick. You were enthusiastic about the fact that everyone can do everything. Even though I was just the manager sitting there holding jewelry and marking down hits, I still felt like I was essential.

You are really good at making people feel really important. Especially when you can't play a sport but you really want to. I'm incredibly bad at sports but I was still on the team.

When someone like you makes me feel important, then I become important.

Thank you. **Rebecca**

Rough notes prepared by Carolyn prior to seeing a counselor at 2:45 p.m.. about a concern with her science class.

Mr. H.

- he always seems to have an excuse to be mad at the class even if it isn't anybody's fault
- insults people in class -- he thinks he's joking, but it isn't funny to anybody else but to him
- I don't like him at all

- we all feel stupid
- he asks questions he hasn't taught us and we are just supposed to know, I guess
- if we can't answer, he won't give up until we're completely humiliated
- it seems like he wants to tear people apart

- I don't want to ask questions because he makes me feel I am wrong for asking the question
- he gets really off topic, but it's not a good off topic that matters to us -- it's making fun of people

- maybe I don't understand him at all
- he won't do anything extra to help Cindy learn in class, even though she's blind -- he just tells her she has to do it herself -- she finds that really hard to deal with

- I hate the class -- I hate him.

Would you please put this in Ms. M.'s mailbox? Thanks.

You're . . . Inspirational

Dear Ms. M.,

Last year at grad if certain people had had their way, the same people would have been running everything. You were in charge of grad and it seemed you completely flipped the order around. It worked out really well. They won some awards, and made some of the decisions, but not them all.

You didn't get into the social hierarchy, but you didn't accept that some people would be the bosses because they were louder or more confident. You don't give them more attention in class or in the halls either. You seem to realize that lots of times other people deserve the attention -- the people who are quieter, who might be in the band, or who aren't necessarily the leaders of the parties.

Rebecca

Student Magazine – April Edition (Unedited submission)

Advice Column: You Ask – We Answer!

Guest Columnist: Mark

Teachers, I seriously don't think I could handle teaching 15 and 16 year olds. Let me tell you a few things about them that might help you.

When kids are in the little rebel stage, 15 and 16, lots of you think you have to control them and scare them to get respect. Forget it. Those 15 year olds, they want to be older. They think the life of an 18 year old is totally ideal. Instead of being the dominant figure, maybe if you give them a little respect, you'll receive it back. Show them what they have lost instead of scolding them -- you didn't do this, therefore you're grounded, but in classroom terms. No kid wants to be told all the time they didn't do something.

If they're screwing up, deal with them instead of running to their parents. It doesn't help. Then they don't want to be at school or at home either. Let them be a bit more independent. Let them know that by not doing this assignment it just brought their final grade down maybe 3%.

Most kids are getting out of that "I'm Daddy's boy" thing, they're trying to be independent, but they're still living in their parent's house. They don't need another authority at school acting like a second mom during the day. Sure, some kids do. They need to listen, shut-up, and be scared into being quiet. One way won't work for everybody. But most just need to feel more comfortable in class and be given a little more respect. If they get smiled at, instead of feeling you want to bite their head off, they might behave a little better in class.

Yes, we are your students and we have to listen to you. But we don't have to respect you. That's a different thing. If you want respect, you have to give it. When you demand it, it goes completely opposite with lots of kids. When I was 15, I went totally opposite to what I was told. If I came into class and did something stupid, and the teacher yelled at me, I could guarantee you I'd be bad in class that day. That's just the way it is.

If you deal with us just a bit differently and respect us, I think you'll have a lot less problems. I think teachers have to initiate it. It seems you're scared to totally come outright with us just because you might be pushing that teacher-student line -- you know like talking about personal stuff. Don't expect kids to respond all the time, or even appreciate you. But if you want it, I guess you've got to try.

As I said, I couldn't handle high school kids.

Conversation in the hall between classes.

Keith: Whew, finally I finished that English challenge course. I didn't have a lot of time to do it, but now it's done. You know Ms. Q. sure really went out of her way to help me complete it and get that book signed. I couldn't find her the day it was due. Today she found me and said I could still hand it in.

Mangus: Yeah, I took English 23 from her last year. I remember writing the mid-term. I had such a good day. I just wrote like crazy, I didn't stop and didn't do a good copy.

When I got back to class, she said she had an essay that she would like to read. Sitting there listening, I realized it was mine! After it was done, everyone asked who wrote it. Everyone was shocked but I felt almost proud and very gratified that it was so appreciated.

She respected me before that, but after that I think she respected me a lot more. She knew I had potential and she'd always come up to me and ask where my next assignment was.

Keith: In my class, she always makes it so it is comfortable for me to work. She lets me move, or she moves people if that helps. She always gives us deadlines for assignments and then reminded us, like everyday.

She pushes us because it seems like some of the class don't care and I think she thinks they will drop out of school. I guess that's all right. We get tired of hearing it, but looking back I kind of see she is pushing us because she wants us to get it done and stay in school.

Mangus: Better go -- see you after class.

Conversation between Tiffany and Sarah on the first day of second semester.

Sarah: Remember that time in chemistry class last semester when we were bored so we started drawing pictures on each other's lab-sheets?

Tiffany: Yeah, it was pretty funny and Mr. X. actually didn't get mad at us or anything.

Sarah: I couldn't believe it when he came up to us and looked at the drawings. Then he started laughing.

Tiffany: We all just laughed amongst ourselves, and then he ended up drawing a picture on one of your things.

Sarah: Yeah, something about chemistry and it was pretty funny.

Tiffany: Remember after class when he came up and kind of said, "Well I understand that this is a little bit boring!"

Sarah: There was something happening like that almost every day.

Tiffany: Yeah, it was fun, just to joke around with him and the class.

Slipped under Mr. E's office door.

> ## Whew!
>
> **Mr. E.,**
> Thanks for being there and listening to me.
>
> You didn't tell me what to do, but you gave me suggestions. That made me feel really good because I didn't have to go and talk to my friends who sometimes aren't the best people to talk to -- like they just don't help sometimes.
>
> The age factor really helps because you're more mature and you've probably been through certain situations that are similar and maybe heard of situations of how people dealt with it.
>
> You're somebody in the school that I can trust because you won't go tell another teacher or anything like that. I think that it's really great that schools have counselors.
>
> Thanks,
>
> **Tiffany**
>
> **I couldn't have done it without you.**

Written on pale yellow paper and mailed through Canada Post.

Dear Mr. T.,

You were a teacher of the school that I just happened to get to know. It did make a difference that you weren't a teacher of mine. We could just talk after class or I could just drop in and say hi. I wasn't worried about you grading me on how well I could throw a basketball or something!

I remember I was having a really bad time in first semester. I didn't seem to care about anything, and I was just going through the motions. You had told me I could always talk to you, so I asked if we could talk. You said sure, come in tomorrow. I thought about it when I went home, and I realized the next day was when you were leaving for the Caribbean. I went in the next day and asked if you were sure you had time that day. You said, "Definitely, I'm making time to do this." I felt great.

Thanks too for checking back with me, asking if I'm doing a little better and if I'd talked to my parents.

I saw you out at Reds around Christmas time. It was great. Even though I'm out of high school, we could sit down and have a conversation. It shows you're still thinking about how your former students are doing.

See you again.

Victoria

Graduation Banquet – 8:50 p.m.

Victoria: Our next award is the Danielle Steel Award for the teacher who turned the best real life adventure into fiction.

Mangus: There were a lot of good nominations this year, but the winner is Ms. G. for her story, "Bronze and Booze, they too don't mix!" Ms. G. please come up to receive your award.

Victoria: That was a great story Ms. G. The first time you ever skipped school and all that happened! Wow.

Mangus: You're out there in the middle of a field, lying on top of your car with a friend.

Victoria: Your shirts are off, you're tanning and drinking a bottle of wine.

Mangus: You look down and there's a police officer right there.

Victoria: A small town, and everyone hears about this really fast.

Congratulations Ms. G. You know we always had fun with your stories. You could always relate what we were doing to a story of yours. It's kind of neat.

Mangus: Mostly, we don't think of teachers having a life outside of school. It seems more human and you're more real this way.

Victoria: When we heard these stories, we felt we knew you and then it was really hard to let you down, because we knew you had high expectations for us. We wanted to do an awesome job on an assignment because we wanted you to be impressed with us too.

Mangus: You always found out things about us too. You actually hunted me down after class one day because you thought I didn't look happy in class. Once we went out for coffee, just to talk. You've always given me lots of respect.

Your only rule in class is respect and that's my only rule in life. I basically learned to define it through you.

Victoria: You gave me a second chance on an exam once. I was in a bad mood and I didn't know how I was going to write the exam. I didn't do one question. You said you didn't know why I didn't do it because you knew I could do it. You gave it back to me, said you wanted me to do it, graded it and put it as part of my test mark. It made the rest of the semester a little easier knowing that you really wanted me to succeed.

Mangus: Thanks for telling us about you and thanks for listening to us.

Victoria: Congratulations, and by the way, be careful tanning!

Placed in an envelope and put in the assignment slot in the math office.

Fantastic!!

Ms. D,
I think you are one of the biggest math fanatics I've ever met. You're very positive about math and it seems like you really enjoy teaching it. I don't think you'd like to teach English or social, but math fits you really well.

I wasn't good at math until I had you. Now I'm very good at math. You changed my outlook on it by making it easy and something I can understand.

In Math 33 when we do exceptionally well we get stickers on our tests. It makes me feel good to have a sticker right in the middle of my test saying I did excellent. Maybe I'm the only one, but I think it is a good idea. I don't think a lot of teachers think about it because we're in high school. It makes me feel very proud to get my test back and have a sticker -- Mickey Mouse, you know!

You are strict, you teach well, but there is always time for a bit of fun.

Thanks.

Mangus

Mailed by Canada Post

With Warmest Thanks

Dear Mr. F.,

Thanks for calling me this afternoon. We've been through a lot together in high school. We've had fun together on road trips and joked around a lot. We've felt a lot closer to you -- our coach.

I knew your Dad was quite sick. I knew since volleyball season and we were in the city finals. Before the final game we all dedicated the game to someone or something important. You brought a picture of you and your Dad together, and said you were dedicating your game to your best friend in the world -- your Dad. After the game and we had won we had a group meeting. On the sheet that said where everyone was playing, you wrote "Dad" and underlined it. It was really moving.

Your call to thank me for going to the funeral yesterday really helped because I wasn't sure if I should go because I didn't actually know your Dad. It seemed like a good idea though, because you are a good friend and have been an important teacher to me. Jenny and I wanted you to know we sort of understand how much you loved your Dad. I'm glad that we could let you know we cared.

Thanks for three great years.

Michaela

Handed in at the office on semester turn around day.

Success . . . is doing your best.

Ms. W.,

I never thought I'd make it through Bio 20. I was in a class with a bunch of grade 10s and they were all a lot smarter than me and that's not an easy thing to get into when you're in grade 11.

You wouldn't take any excuses. You wouldn't accept it when I'd say, "Ms. T., I can't do this." You said, "Sure you can." You realized that I'd do okay on the tests but I wasn't handing anything in. I ended up the course with a 76%.

Maybe you do this for everybody -- you're very good at knowing us. Once I got a good mark in bio, I started to think well maybe math's not so bad either.

During Bio 20, things were really weird with fighting with friends. Then at home I didn't want to talk to my parents, so things were kind of snarky everywhere.

One day we were cutting up pigs and I have trouble cutting up pigs. It just makes me want to throw up. It was just horrible and I couldn't do it. I was so stressed out, everything was just going nuts, and if I had to cut up that pig, I was just going to break. I was just going to lie down in the middle of the bio room for the rest of the day.

You were really good about it. You said I didn't have to cut up the pig, and gave me some other work to do. Thanks for recognizing the warning signs of someone about to go schizo, and respecting what I was going through.

Thanks,

Rebecca

Handed in attached to a mid-term assignment.

From the desktop of Tiffany

Mr. L,

You're one person I really, really respect because you're a person that I would never go against. Like, I'd never not do my work because you're kind of intimidating. But, you're not mean, we can joke around with you because you tell jokes on yourself, but then it's let's get to work kind of thing. It's really neat that you do that.

We never know what you're going to say. Basically you just joke around every day. Lots of times you have little blurbs for the day when you just talk for five or 10 minutes about something that you find really important or something you think we should think about. If we're rude, you remind us that you're the head of the class here!

I liked it at the beginning of the year when you talked about serfdom. You pretended you were the king and how if we lived in "Your" land we'd be nothing. You got everyone involved and when someone would say they weren't living in your land you'd say, "Off with their head." It was kind of funny, but after that was done, everyone sat down and got back to work.

Thanks,

Tiffany

Given to Ms. W. just prior to leaving for summer holidays

Learning is a Lifetime Journey

Ms. W.,
You could have just held a grudge and put a big sticker on me that said bad student. Instead you totally forgave me and have always encouraged me.

I got into some trouble at that tournament in Lethbridge in grade 10. You let me know you didn't like what I did, but that you thought I was still a great person and a good student.

I did really well in your Science 10 class. I was kind of at the top of the class and that was always nice. Thanks for encouraging me.

Remember that time I came to your class having a bad day and I was pretty upset. You could tell, so you took me outside the class and helped cheer me up. It helped to just get it out and talk about it.

Thanks,

Michaela

Hearing what these young people had to say about adults in their high schools, led me to a number of questions. Did teachers know what students thought about them and their classes? How well was I showing teachers, through my actions, my comments and my questions, that what young people were saying was important.? How could I do this better?

CHAPTER 6

QUESTIONS WE ASK

Listening and talking

Clandinin and Connelly (1995) stated, "teachers on the landscape learn how to act and think in appropriate ways, ways that are sanctioned by others positioned on the conduit" (p. 158). Earlier they noted, "the professional knowledge landscape that teachers inhabit creates epistemological dilemmas" (p. 4). I will come back to these ideas after reflecting on what I heard young people say about their teachers and what I have read in literature. This reflection will be from my perspective as a principal. I am being directed by a troubled feeling within me -- a feeling that is forcing me to ask, "What am I doing to help or hinder teachers recognize and act upon the messages young people have for them?" or "What actions by teachers are my daily questions and comments really sanctioning or encouraging?"

What are the messages heard in a high school -- from students, teachers, and principals? Let's listen to a few:

A student

> John says, "I do so little in school because no one cares for me, no one listens to me, it's no fun, they try to make me do things I don't want to do, and they never try to find out what I want to do."
>
> John would say, "The teachers care about me, listen to what I have to say, don't try to make me do things I don't want to do, and ask me what I'd like to do once in a while. Besides, they make learning fun." (Glasser, 1997, p. 598)

John is a fictional character. He is also one many of us would recognize. His statements cause frustration perhaps to teachers and principals. Like so much of what I have heard from young people, there is a tension within the message -- parts of which I want to accept, and parts I want to dismiss. What we accept and what we dismiss from any of their comments is a personal choice. I, however, want to force myself to hear the entire message, for without hearing it all I may never come to terms with what is being said. I don't particularly like John's emphasis on it being up to the school or teacher to change. I don't accept the statement that we must never expect students to do things they don't want to do. But then, I am reminded by Noddings' (1992) comments:

> The teacher-student relationship is, of necessity, unequal. Teachers have special responsibilities that students cannot assume. . . . teachers must, that is, take on a dual perspective: their own and that of their students. (p. 107)

It seems to me that part of that "special responsibility" is listening to both what we like and don't like, about what students are saying.

A teacher

> Thanks very much for your kind and astute remarks. They came at one of those low moments that we sometimes experience in this profession, and so are doubly welcome. It's good to know that we are really seen. (Note from a high school teacher to her principal)

This note from the teacher to her principal is interesting, especially when she said, "they came at one of those low moments." Over the years I have written and received many notes. It fascinated me how often people responded to me with, "your note was just what I needed at the time." I too have felt this upon reading a note from someone. I wonder, is there ever a time we don't need or appreciate some respectful feedback on what we are doing?

A principal

Questions asked by a principal to a teacher:
  How was your day?
  How's it going?
  What about those Oilers last night?

  What part of the curriculum did you cover?
  How will you evaluate what students have learned?
  How do you maintain control in your classroom?

  Who did you spend time talking to?
  What did you learn about them?
  Do you feel like you have a new friend?

Often the feedback principals give teachers is in the questions they ask. Not only what we say, but what we ask, indicates those things we value. As I reflect upon what these young people said, I will attempt to come to terms with the questions I might ask of teachers -- questions that would both begin conversation and show respect for the messages of young people. Questions that could lead teachers to comfortably base their practice on what young people are telling them.

What are the messages these young people are giving to their teachers and to all educators? I identified themes in my review of their transcripts and in the messages presented in chapter 5. In many ways the themes are interconnected, but they do highlight aspects of what are woven into the web of practice everyday.

Know me

The classroom is a very human place that is tremendously influenced by the teacher. Ricci (1993) wrote of a teacher who "transformed the room with the simple bright force of her energy" (p. 55). Often the language of community and caring is used to describe staff relationships with students (CEA Report, 1995, p. 182). Over and over again I heard young people talk about this human element -- "we got to know you as a person," (Jeff); "you seem to talk to me very human to human," (Mark); or "you're a bit more personal" (Bill). Mark, in reference to his English teacher, said

> she just talked to me. I was not really quite a friend, but more of a friend and less of just a student. She'd talk to me human to human, not teacher to student. It's hard to explain, but there was a difference though.

Seeing the teacher as human perhaps is not entirely natural for young people. I enjoyed Carrier's (1991) reference to the nun and priest who ran the school.

> At school, I took a really good look at the nun because, You see, the girls in my class are as flat as ironing boards. The nun wears so many dresses and slips and skirts and rosaries and veils you can't even tell if she's got titties underneath her bib. From what I hear, Your priest hasn't got a ding-dong under his soutane; maybe the nun hasn't got titties. (p. 49)

Teachers are distant, separate; they are older: "He's [poetry teacher] not terrifically old -- in his thirties" (Laurence, 1974, p. 205) or "What will I be able to remember when I'm really old, when I'm forty or fifty?" (Carrier, 1991, p. 164). Along with this perception come some mixed messages. Jourard (1964) shared:

> You can know me truly only if I let you, only if I want you to know me. If you want me to reveal myself, just demonstrate your good will -- your will to employ your powers for my good, and not for my destruction. (p. 5)

Dryden (1995), sharing the thoughts of a young person, said, "I won't follow unless following makes sense for *me*. You talk with me, really talk, and maybe I'll do it *with* you" (p. 207). He went on to say, "getting close to kids *is* harder now; getting close to them has never been more necessary; having adequate teachers has never been more crucial" (p. 208).

The young people I spoke with clearly shared that they wanted genuine, person-to-person relationships with teachers. The implication from them and from literature is that the initiation for this must come from the adult -- the teacher. This is not always an easy action. Huggan (1987), referring to conversation between a young girl and her aunt-adult friend, said, "after the preliminary questions about how school was going, she didn't have the slightest notion of what to talk to me about" (p. 36). I can empathize with this feeling -- it isn't always easy to know what to talk about. Dryden (1993) talked about classroom learning and pointed out that the teacher is responsible for

> demonstrating that learning has also to do with other kids, with teachers, personal relationships, expectations, clues, jokes, ironies, surprises, information that comes from everywhere, status, confidence, pace; comfort. (p. 138)

A teacher really is in a wonderful position to know what to talk to young people about -- so much of their daily life is either shared or alluded to with every comment or action.

Perhaps it is a matter of focusing on the other person -- the student. Noddings (1984) stressed that the one-caring "must see the other's reality as a possibility for [her] own" (p. 14). Not only does this enable a more personal relationship between student and teacher, but as the NASSP Report (1996) indicated, this is likely to enhance learning. It said,

> a teacher must, above all, know the material and pedagogy for presenting it. But if being expert in instructional strategies includes the ability to engage the learner -- and we believe it does -- then, as a corollary, good teachers are adept at establishing the kind of teacher-student relationship that will help make the child receptive to learning. (pp. 24-25)

All people seem to need to develop and strengthen the relationships they have with people they care for. Strong, Silver, & Robinson (1995) said,

> [the] drive toward interpersonal involvement is pervasive in all our lives. Further, most of us work hardest on those relationships that are reciprocal -- what you have to offer is of value to me, and what I have to offer is of some value to you. (p. 12)

How this happens is likely a very individual thing. Deal & Peterson (1994), Dryden (1995) and Noddings (1984) all provided insights into this. Deal & Peterson talked about "'being with' rather than 'being around' people" (p. 43); Dryden saw teaching as "the act of putting someone else at the centre" (p. 279); while Noddings powerfully differentiated between "caring about" which "always involves a certain benign neglect," and "caring for" which "requires engrossment, commitment, displacement of motivation" (p. 112).

All of these indicate far more than a set of specific actions -- they refer much more to an overall attitude, which in this case, the teacher possesses and demonstrates. Very consistently in my conversations with young people, I heard them refer to a teacher having a good sense of humor. I would hear "it's really funny," "a laugh for a second can really help," "we all just laughed amongst ourselves," "it was fun just to joke around with him," or "you are a nice, big smile to see." A sense of humor didn't necessarily mean someone was a stand-up comedian who told jokes all the time. A sense of humor appeared to be what young people referred to as the overall attitude a teacher showed -- an attitude that allowed real life to bubble up in everyday interactions. A sense of humor is about showing humanity in oneself and in others. A sense of humor is also:

> One student laughs in response to a joke told by his companion. "Share the joke, boys," the teacher urges. They do so, everyone laughs and work resumes again. (Case study, New Norway, CEA Report, 1995, p. 208)

At the end of the day, as we walk together in the hallway, I, the principal, might ask a teacher

> What did you learn about students (or a student) today?
> Any new or strengthened friendships today? Who? What happened?
> Who did you win over today? Who won you over?
> Any good laughs in class? What made it funny? Who started it?
> Who clicked into learning today for the first time? How did that happen?
> Did you have fun in class today?
> You know those kids pretty well -- does it make a difference?

"Like a friend, you have to earn that respect every day. If you do, your relationship will be fine. It will be better than it has ever been, in fact" (Dryden, 1995, p. 104).

Respect me

> In M. Germain's class, they felt for the first time that they existed and that they were the objects of the highest regard: they were judged worthy to discover the world. (Camus, 1995, p. 146)

> "*Si,*" I said, still awaiting laughter that didn't come; and in the reverent silence afterwards it seemed the first time in that classroom that the air itself hadn't felt malevolent and strange, something set against me. (Ricci, 1993, p. 56)

Invariably I heard the young people talk about three ideas -- safety, expectations and respect. They spoke about them as a single package, that included all three. Mangus and Rebecca spoke of a teacher who was "a very good technical teacher" and who "prepared us well for exams," but had "no friendship or camaraderie with students in the class." Very directly they said, "You don't have our respect because you don't give it." They felt safe in this class, there were high expectations, but they didn't feel respected. Through the eyes of a principal, Mitchell (1947) spoke of this -- "the woman [teacher] had such complete amnesia for childhood; . . . The damn woman needed a refresher course, Child Mediumship, held alternatively one summer in haylofts, the next under blanket tents" (p. 88).

This message from Mangus and Rebecca was in direct contradiction to Carolyn who spoke of "the most disciplined class I've ever been in," and of a teacher: "You hold us really responsible for all our work" and "you always discuss it and look at different points of view than your own." Carolyn was describing an environment where she had experienced high expectations, safety, and respect. Interestingly, it didn't seem to matter how teachers established high expectations and safety, as long as the respect was there. Keith said, "She [English teacher] always gives us deadlines for assignments and then reminds us, like everyday." He went on to say however that she did that "because she wants us to get it done and stay in school." Carolyn, on the other hand, said, "You

[English teacher] let us know that if we don't hand in an assignment then our marks are going to be a lot lower. You kind of let us take it on ourselves."

The NASSP Report (1996) linked these ideas by stating, "one of the most important ways that a high school respects its students is by having high academic expectations for all of them" (p. 50). I will take the liberty of expanding this thought to include that we show respect by having high expectations for all aspects of life in high schools. Keith shared with us the incredible effort he put into a basketball drill, simply because he respected his coach and his expectations. Jeff knew that he would either do well on a chemistry exam or be expected to be there at lunch hour for tutorials. Rebecca, while admitting she would much rather do nothing, appreciated the fact that her teacher would not let them do badly There is a harsh tone in these statements about teachers, but they are in all cases softened by a context of respect. Choy (1995) pointed this out in a lovely fashion:

> In Miss E. Doyle's classroom, at least, there was no name-calling; in class no pushing, no kicking. Not even whispering. Her commands were simple, and simply barked: "Sit." "Eyes front." "Feet flat on the floor." And all the boys and girls obeyed. (p. 173)
>
> At recess, our dialects and accents conflicted, our clothes, heights and handicaps betrayed us, our skin colours and backgrounds clashed, but inside Miss E. Doyle's tightly disciplined kingdom we were all -- lions or lambs -- equals.
>
> We had glimpsed Paradise. (p. 184)

In some ways, I believe the young people I spoke to had "glimpses of Paradise" with their teachers -- glimpses they often couldn't understand, but glimpses they certainly could feel. Hans spoke of his math teacher as being "just very kind" but followed this with "we knew there's a line -- respect is what it is." Jeff's comment about his chemistry teacher is very telling -- "You're so lenient yet you can control the class like there's no tomorrow." Rebecca shared, "you didn't accept that some people would be the bosses because they were louder or more confident. . . . You seemed to realize that lots of times other people deserve the attention." As Mitchell (1947) said, "Though she gave the children more freedom than they had enjoyed before, Miss Thompson expected a great deal of them" (p. 158).

Noddings (1984) reminded us, "the student is infinitely more important than the subject" (p. 20). The teachers who these young people spoke of as having high expectations, as providing safety, and as showing respect, all understood this and used it to the advantage of the young person and his or her learning. Later Noddings (1992), with reference to a lack of student-teacher relationships, said, "what is lost is not only academic knowledge but a relation that might yield a lifetime of friendship and wisdom" (p. 108).

Young people are looking for the possibilities of this complete package -- high expectations, safety, and respect -- everyday. Camus (1995) pointed out that something is missing when it doesn't occur.

> At the *lycee*, on the other hand, the teachers were like those uncles you are entitled to choose among. That is, you could dislike them . . . The literature teacher, whom the children saw more often than the others, was the one they would have been most likely to love, and in fact Jacques and Pierre clung to him in almost all those classes without however being able to depend on him, since he knew nothing

> about them and since, once class was over, he went off to a different life and so did they. (p. 222)

Young people in high schools are daily making choices about a number of things: important choices about relationships and about learning. These young people talked about wonderful teachers -- people -- who set high expectations for them, who ensured them a safe place to be and who in every action showed a respectful attitude for them as individuals. All of these young people were engaged by the opportunities provided to them by these teachers and they, in turn, responded in ways that likely rewarded the teachers.

At the end of the day, as we walk together in the hallway, I, the principal, might ask a teacher

> Sue seems pretty secure in your class. Why is that?
> What do the kids say about the "feeling" in your classroom?
> Tell me about respect -- what does it mean to you?
> Who's reaching their potential? Who isn't? How do you know?
> They were really writing today -- everyone was discussing -- so why?
> How do you know so much about your students' lives?

Make time for me

> He'd [science teacher] be sitting at his desk, marking assignments or reading, yet he always seemed accessible, open to conversation, even eager. I had never known an adult to be so casual, so ready to talk. (Huggan, 1987, p. 114)

Teachers provide young people with many gifts. One mentioned repeatedly was the gift of time. Dryden (1995) said, "the central thread . . . turned out not to be any of the big answers. It was time" (p. 272). Young people notice that some teachers always have time for them. They also seem to realize that these same teachers are very busy people with lots to do. However, as Victoria pointed out when she asked a teacher if he was sure he had time that day, "he said, 'Definitely, I'm making time to do this.'"

This was an important issue to Jane who was also very willing to put a lot of time in herself. I heard her say: [of her physics teacher] "You were always willing to take an interest, make some phone calls and look into those things," [of her biology teacher] "just the time you put in was incredible. . . . You always just said, 'That's my job and it's what I'm supposed to do,'" or [of a computer teacher] "it wasn't your job, but you always helped me even if I didn't have a clue." Jane was seeing teachers model a dedication to excellence which she herself showed and wanted to see in adults. The time spent together also provided a sense of closeness -- a closeness that indicated real professionalism on the part of a teacher. Ricci (1993) described this closeness:

> That pleasure seemed to draw something at first from the lunch hours I spent with Sister Mary, from the quiet closeness the empty classroom took on then, the warmth that lingered in my shoulder after she'd placed a hand there, the way her clothes rustled intimately when she leaned in beside me as if she were about to whisper to me some secret about herself. (p. 57)

These young people felt they knew their teachers better as a result of the time they spent together. Young people spend far more time in large group, class settings with teachers, than in after school, smaller settings. It was the latter, however, I tended to hear much more about. In reference to her math teacher, Victoria said, "He'd say, 'Come in at 3:30 p.m. and we'll work for a couple of hours.' It showed he really wanted us to do well. Not just a small group of us, but all of us." Another time when a major issue related to graduation was troubling her, Victoria said, "She [the grad coordinator] took the time out to talk to Lisa and I, and we talked for probably 20 minutes. . . . We really felt that we had a lot of input."

Perhaps all young people express a need for individual time with adults. Schoemperlen (1987) spoke of a young girl who said, "I wanted so much to have Rita [an adult friend] all to myself but somehow it never was arranged" (p. 27). The teachers these young people referred to seem to be able to arrange that time. The time can be very short and still meaningful. Tiffany pointed this out when she said, "I'm not in your class any more but you [a science teacher] make a point to stop and talk to me in the hallways."

The gift of time is also seen as part of the way teachers make profound differences in the lives of young people. In reference to a young man in his class who had been in and out of a few schools, Bill said his homeroom teacher "ended up talking to him [the other student], talking to his mom, kept him on his toes and gave him encouragement he needed." Many teachers through their gifts of time have changed the lives of young people. Camus (1995) wrote:

> That is why Jacques had never forgotten him [his teacher], as if, having never really felt the lack of a father he had never known, he had nonetheless subconsciously recognized, first as a child, then during the rest of his life, the one paternal act -- both well thought out and crucial -- that had affected his life as a child. For M. Bernard, his teacher for the year of the *certificat d'etudes*, had at a given moment used all his weight as a man to change the destiny of this child in his charge, and he had in fact changed it. (p. 136)

Time, given by teachers, over and over again, was seen by these young people as making incredible differences and in some ways "changing their destiny."

At the end of the day, as we walk together in the hallways, I, the principal, might ask a teacher

> How did you fit in those two talks with Sabrina and Justin?
> You were in the gym playing floor hockey today -- did you get a chance to eat?
> Your class was full after school. Who really benefited today?
> Are there pulls on your time that I can change?
> How is your time with these kids rewarding to you?
> Thanks for all your time -- Is it worth it to you?
> Whose "destiny" did you influence today?

Inspire me

> He'd taught him to write. He'd taught him to teach. And what a tricky teacher *he* was! With what cunning sleight-of-hand he palmed truths and insights and hid them in his students without their knowing it, to appear magically years later. (Mitchell, 1984, p. 71)

> Teacher competency has more to do with pedagogical tactfulness, having a sensitivity to what is best for each child, having a sense of each child's life and his or her deep preoccupations. It also includes a sense of the aspects that draw the curriculums of math, English, social studies, art, or science to the curriculum of life itself. (Van Manen, 1986, p. 46)

> But it was a jolly, busy, happy swift-flying winter. School work was as interesting, class rivalry as absorbing, as of yore. New worlds of thought, feeling, and ambition, fresh, fascinating fields of unexplored knowledge seemed to be opening out before Anne's eager eyes. (Montgomery, 1908, p. 253).

As I listened to young people tell about how teachers did what they did in classrooms, I kept thinking about Anne's (Montgomery, 1908) ongoing infatuation with Miss Stacy. She, according to Anne, "is so lady like," "explains everything so beautifully," "makes it so clear," and "mostly lets us choose our own subjects [to write about]" (p. 191). They seemed to know, at least from their perspective, what good teaching was all about. It involved a sense of energy, a sense of intrigue, and always a connectedness to them.

Hans, talking about his French teacher, shared, "we know we better get there on time because you just know it is going to be fun and you don't want to miss anything" and Tiffany, commenting about a sense of choice, said "the work was clearly laid out and we could work at our own pace." These teachers did something to make what was learned relevant to the lives of the young people they taught. Jeff told about a teacher who "didn't try to explain the theory of relativity in a mathematical sense, but in a sense that we could understand," and Hans referred to his teacher's ability to "re-create the mountain. He makes the mountain instead of the rock." Tiffany simply said her social studies teacher, "got everyone involved." These teachers, like Mitchell's (1947) Miss Thompson, "seemed to have a faculty for infecting them [students] with enthusiasm in their work" (p. 157). They liked what they did, they were happy and they had a passion for their subject content.

Mangus called his math teacher, "one of the biggest math fanatics I've ever met," and Bill, in reference to a teacher he completely admired, said, "I still think he is completely nuts at times, but he's pretty good at what he does and the class enjoys it. He made my high school experience better." Hans pointed out his appreciation for his teacher's commitment to her own learning, when he said, "you went and took night courses so you could always have little things to add to what we were learning." The CEA Report (1995) said that "students are well aware that it is not just the course content that matters, but how a teacher encourages them to learn" (p. 208). All of this is beautifully expressed in Camus'(1995) description of M. Bernard, whose "class was always interesting for the simple reason that he loved his work with a passion" (p. 143) and who "fed a hunger in them more basic even to the child than to the man, and that is the hunger for discovery" (p. 146).

"We believe that part of the secret for successful teachers is to present students with work that causes them to think, reason, and use their minds well" (NASSP Report, 1996, p. 15). English teachers, for some reason, tended to be praised and criticized the most by students I worked with. Hans talked about an English teacher and said, "the way you would present would make it easier for us to talk and stimulate our thoughts. When we got to our writing we could almost see it from a different perspective." Bill, in reference to an assignment he had done poorly, said, "you talked to me and told me exactly what I did wrong." Carolyn appreciated her English teacher's willingness to "listen to her questions and different answers she came up with." These teachers all showed qualities I came across in my reading. Davies (1994) wrote that, "Mr. Ramsay introduced us to the beauty of the printed book, which comparatively few people understand, . . . I fell in love with beautiful books" (p. 74). Avi (1991) talked of the struggles of an English teacher who wanted "to find new works and new ways to entice the young people of today" (p. 18). Finally Laurence (1974) said, "Morag worships her. . . . No one ever before has talked to Morag about what was good and bad in writing, and shown her why" (p. 135). Perhaps the English classroom is the place in a high school where there is the greatest potential for connections being made between subject matter, and human needs or feelings. It is a place where students "bring their own stories" and we can choose to "hear their story" (Coles, 1990, p. 7) generally in the context of required curriculum. Whether this happens or not seems largely dependent upon the teacher and his or her passion and energy for both young people and subject content; and his or her ability to connect the two.

The young people I spoke to pointed out characteristics, perspectives and knowledge they possessed that were the result of being with one teacher or another. Perhaps this is the ultimate compliment a student can pay his or her teacher. In the words of Voltaire (1758):

> He [referring to the Bulgar captain] had not much intelligence and little understanding of philosophy: it was quite clear that he had not been brought up by Dr. Pangloss [teacher and tutor]. (p. 41)

At the end of the day, as we walk together in the hallway, I, the principal, might ask a teacher

> So what do the kids love about English?
> How did you make that lesson today so relevant to kids?
> What have you read lately -- studied at university?
> What choices about learning did you give kids today?
> Why are all the kids in your classes always there?
> What characteristics do kids leave your class possessing?

Hear me

> Some people listen to you and hear the words but don't hear the meaning or understand it. Some people are too busy thinking what they're going to say next to really listen. Or some people that listen only hear one word and sort of generalize the whole concept of what you're trying to say. I always found that you were willing to really listen to me and take action upon that. Thank you. (Jane, in reference to a school counselor)

> And the more a teacher knows about a student, the more he wants to know. (Dryden, 1995, p. 273)

The listening that I heard these young people talk about referred to hearing more than just words. It was listening to ideas, to feelings, to the environment, and to the multitude of unspoken, but implied messages within a high school. It was also listening with expectation -- expectation that the adult would do something with or about what they heard.

> In the new teacher she found another true and helpful friend. Miss Stacy was a bright, sympathetic young woman with the happy gift of winning and holding the affections of her pupils and bringing out the best that was in them mentally and morally. (Montgomery, 1908, p. 190)

Michaela spoke of a teacher who "totally forgave her and always encouraged her." Michaela had "messed up big time" in grade 10, but this teacher let her know that "she didn't like what I [Michaela] had done, but that she thought I was still a great person and a good student." This action of listening to Michaela and over-riding the specific incident with the overall potential of the person helped set the tone for a very successful high school experience. Similarly Tiffany was thankful to a teacher for listening and she said, "you didn't tell me what to do, but you gave me suggestions. . . . I didn't have to talk to my friends who sometimes aren't the best people to talk to." Noddings (1984) said, "apprehending the other's reality, feeling what he feels as nearly as possible, is the essential part of caring from the view of the one-caring" (p. 16). Both of these young people pointed out adults who listened, who tried to look at situations from a student's perspective, but who also responded with hopeful possibilities.

> The line between flexibility (treating people differently because they are different) and discrimination (treating people differently because of the group they belong to) is not always clear. (CEA Report, 1995, p. 155)

Often a teacher's response to a situation taxes her ability to listen for the subtle messages outlined in the dilemma above. Her response is also viewed as representing what she sees as important. Jane very passionately talked about this:

> You listened when something was bothering me -- those times that I was totally stressed out and felt I couldn't handle anything or I'd just start balling. Or when everything in the world was just terrible -- a problem with friends or I'd just failed a test. Everything would just build up and you would always listen. It seemed you trusted the judgments I made.

Perhaps it was the skill of this teacher to really see Jane's individual differences and needs that is partly responsible for us seeing the very strong and confident person that Jane is today. Carolyn showed disgust with her science teacher who "almost seemed to have an excuse to be mad at the class." She pointed out his refusal to provide "any extra help" to a blind student as a blatant example of not understanding the difference between flexibility and discrimination. Juxtaposed against Rebecca's story of her teacher who "listened to what everyone was talking about when they came into class" and then asked questions that "forced us to face this issue [racism]," one powerfully sees this ability to listen to the "signs." Listening is powerful and as Carrier (1991) humorously pointed out, students learn a lot about a teacher's values in her response:

> The nun didn't give us any homework because it's the birthday of the little saint who flogged himself with his belt when he got undressed. He's a model for young people, the nun told us. Somebody who whips himself with his belt is no example, unless you're looking for an example of a raving lunatic. . . . A model for young people, God, is an inventor. (p. 60)

Listening to young people allows a teacher to understand other messages. Bill, in reference to his math teacher said

> some really strict teachers give us the impression that if we do well, then they'll like us. You'd be the same if I got 80 or if I got 30 on a test. I was treated the same way, probably because you knew, and showed, that not everyone was a math whiz.

A teacher's response to the subtle messages drifting around a high school is vital to the way young people understand and see that teacher. Ricci's (1993) statement that "if I'd been more intelligent, more myself somehow, Sister Bertram [teacher] might have been kinder; but everything about me proclaimed my ignorance" (p. 55) and Laurence's (1974) message -- "the teachers hate her [Morag]. Ha ha. She isn't a little flower, is why. That will be the day, when she tries to please a living soul" (p. 71) both reinforce this need.

Starratt (1996) said

> an ethic of caring requires fidelity of persons, a willingness to acknowledge their right to be who they are, an openness to encountering them in their authentic individuality, a loyalty to a relationship. (p. 163)

Rebecca's letter to her art teacher addressed this aspect of listening. She said "it was like you [teacher] said it was fine if I wanted to be completely different, as long as my art's still the same" and then went on to say "you accept us, there are limits you set, and we don't have to impress you." Near the end of her letter she thanked this teacher "for showing us that we can only be intimidated by someone if we place enough importance on that person to value their opinion." Rebecca's art teacher had skillfully listened to the messages around her and through her actions, not her words, had shown her students what she valued.

Finally Michaela talked about a human, but subtle aspect of listening. She said "you [coach] said you were sorry and you spoke to the whole team about it." Young people admire the simple action of saying, "I'm sorry," and learn a great deal about humility, listening and values when this action occurs.

At the end of the day, as we walk together in the hallway, I, the principal, might ask a teacher

> So what have you heard from kids today?
> How did you respond?
> What do you think they learned from your reaction?
> What did you learn about kids that you didn't already know?
> What was the most important thing your students learned today?
> Anything you picked up around the school today that I need to be aware of?

Understand me

In reference to his teachers, Mark said, "most of you have liked me actually. You didn't always like me when I was being a little shit, but you liked me outside of class." He saw himself as a person who generally didn't abide by the overall expectations of the school. No doubt he was troubling to many of his teachers, both because of behavioral issues and his lack of academic success. Mark did not fit the mold that most teachers themselves had come from. His comments, however, indicate that he felt most of them somehow understood him well enough that they could sense the "spirit" in him. In a futuristic look at education, Dryden (1995) said

> staff decided that perhaps they should spend more time preparing these teachers to deal with kids who *weren't* just like them, who *didn't* love learning, who ran for cover at the first hint of it. (p. 276)

Earlier, referring to a teacher, Dryden said, "she is an achiever and they are not, and she doesn't know what it's like not to be one" (p. 193).

Perhaps this is one of the most powerful messages that Mark has shared. His comments and suggestions are requests to teachers to relate better with these "non-achievers." Forcefully, he asked teachers to try to understand students a bit better. We hear, "instead of being the dominant figure, maybe if you give them respect, you'll receive it back," "most just need to feel more comfortable in class and be given a little more respect," or "we are your students and we have to listen to you. But we don't have to respect you." His final plea is for teachers to risk letting the kids know them, while realizing that they can't "expect kids to respond all the time, or even appreciate you." Noddings (1992) asked us to "relax the impulse to control" by encouraging "teachers to explore with students" and involving "students in governing their own classrooms and schools" (p. 174). Mark, along with these two writers, was alluding to issues of understanding students well enough to ensure the best possible opportunities for learning become available.

Understanding students can also be about knowing their special interests and building upon them. Jane spoke about a Psychology 30 paper in which she had put a lot of effort. Her teacher had known her interest in the subject matter and arranged for her to make a presentation to a Physical Education 10 class. Jane said, "I loved doing that huge presentation" and then went on to wonder how her teacher knew "the Physical Education 10 girls were doing a similar project on body image." Bill and Tiffany talked of a counselor whom they could always talk to and who knew them really well -- well enough to know what they were interested in, and in Bill's case connect him with a special opportunity related to broadcasting. Starratt (1996) said, "the educator must never stop believing that each child is capable of something wonderful and heroic, and that he or she will never exhaust his or her possibilities" (p. 8). Understanding students is part of helping them truly achieve what they are capable of.

Rebecca and Michaela referred to academic success largely based on their teachers understanding them well enough to know how they might best learn. These teachers through specific actions helped these two young people believe in themselves. Michaela's math teacher "knew she got really uptight before tests," "knew it bothered her when teachers look over her shoulder when she was working," and "knew she was intimidated by math." Rebecca's biology teacher watched her closely enough to point out that "she'd do okay on tests but wasn't handing anything in!" or recognized the warning signs of her going "schizo" and respected what she was going through. The NASSP Report (1996) stated:

> instruction at the high school level will improve when teachers gain more insight into how their lessons register on students. . . . They should interview students to determine the worth of the instructional techniques and materials used in courses. (p. 57)

Michaela points out this precise issue when she said to her math teacher:

> thanks for always asking us how your teaching is and if we'd be more successful if you taught a different way. I've given you suggestions and you've completely followed up with them.

When adults who are important to young people act based on knowledge of that person, it has significant impact. Dahl's (1975) interaction between Danny and his father is a telling example of this.

> "You know something interesting, Danny? You must be easily the best five-year-old mechanic in the world."
>
> This was the greatest compliment he had ever paid me. I was enormously pleased. (p. 15)

Rebecca talked about her role on the volleyball team and said, "even though I was just the manager . . . I still felt like I was essential." She finished off saying, "when someone like you [coach] makes me feel important, then I am important." Her coach understood her need to be part of something and arranged the situation so she felt needed and important.

Connecting student interest to adult expertise is another way teachers open opportunities for young people. Hans, referring to a teacher who had written an "actual television script that had been submitted," said "it's great to know that there's someone like you, one in a million, who I can go talk to and ask questions." He loved to write and here was a resource close by to whom he could refer. Rebecca not only saw her teacher as a resource, but also a conduit to other resources. She spoke of her English teacher as "allowing her to explore and take risks" and "suggesting ways to make her work more perfect." She also saw him "explore things with them" and enthusiastically spoke of the three week project at the university with "this guy with a PhD on Frankenstein." This admiration of teachers with understandings and knowledge young people desire is shared by Voltaire (1758) and Lim (1989). Voltaire wrote, "and young Candide listened to his [his tutor, Pangloss] teaching with that unhesitating faith which marked his age and character"(p. 20). Lim said,

> I had a wonderful teacher who encouraged me in my drawing. A new art school had opened in the attic of our school building and she took one of my drawings to show the director. It was a proud moment for me. (p. 41)

These young people all experienced teachers who attempted to understand their inner longings and interests and as a result opened up opportunities for further learning.

Finally young people expressed admiration for teachers who opened up opportunities for them in the greater world through their own time and connections. Generally these were opportunities for students who themselves made great efforts.

> You're my best students. I've decided to nominate you for secondary-school scholarships. (Camus, 1995, pp. 159-160)
>
> Miss Stacy wants to organize a class among her advanced students who mean to study for the entrance examination into Queens. (Montgomery, 1908, p. 242)

Football was key to Keith's feeling of success. He tells of his coach who on the first day they met, "asked if I was looking for a scholarship." He went on to say, "because you [coach] have played football you could really help me. Because you played football, you had contact with scouts and knew I had potential." Here we see the combination of teacher expertise, teacher knowledge of a student, and a teacher's personal connections coming together to assist a student realize a dream. Michaela talked of a teacher whom she got to know very well through her work on a school leadership council and said, "you've let me use you as a reference, you've been there to talk to when there was a problem, and you took us on the best trip of my high school life." Once again a teacher, through diverse experiences, had come to understand a student, find out what she wanted for the future, and begun the process of making future connections for her.

At the end of the day, as we walk together in the hallway, I, the principal, might ask a teacher

> How have you come to understand some of our most reluctant learners so well?
> What do you do that makes them want to succeed in your classes?
> Your field trip today -- what opportunities did it open for kids?
> Many of your top students have applied for scholarships -- is that your doing?
> You set up some mentors for students -- who are they, what are they doing?
> Tell me about your interest in genealogy -- or sports medicine?

Share with me

> You get almost intrigued with adults. It's like you haven't tasted an apple yet so you don't know if the apple is good because you've never had an apple in your life. Then you taste the apple and well, these things are pretty good. (Hans)

The young people I spoke with had a keen interest in knowing about the adult people who were their teachers. They seemed to get glimpses of what the adult world was like through their relationships with some teachers. There was a certain fascination. Dahl (1975) related some wonderful insights about father and son relationships. I am sharing some of these, because they are so similar to the underlying desires I heard young people express. Danny (Dahl, 1975) said, "my father, without the slightest doubt, was the most marvelous and exciting father any boy ever had" (p. 8) and "it was impossible to be bored in my father's company. He was too sparky a man for that" (p. 16). Like Danny, the young people I talked to seemed to know a lot about some teachers, and this knowledge was both "marvelous and exciting."

Carolyn had very high expectations of her teachers. Two whom she most respected let her into their personal worlds. Of her social studies teacher, she said, "most teachers wouldn't tell us all that stuff about their families . . . but it seems to really include everyone of us." Her expression of pleasure to her chemistry teacher perhaps tells it all -- "I loved it when you would talk to us and tell us about your family and about babies and about everything. . . . I just loved chem." Chemistry was wonderful, at least partly, because it was learned in an environment of openness and sharing. Camus (1995) shared

> their teacher did not devote himself just to what he was paid to teach them; he welcomed them with simplicity into his personal life, he lived that life with them, told them about his childhood and the lives of children he had known, shared with them his philosophy but not his opinions. (pp. 146-7)

A teacher's sharing of his or her life with students provided for incredible learning and lessons of everyday life. Michaela's call from her coach to thank her for attending his father's funeral was a learning she will always carry with her. When she said, "I wasn't sure if I should go [to the funeral] because I didn't know your Dad" she was verbalizing a hesitation or doubt she had, that only her coach could resolve for her.

The young people I talked to loved to hear teachers' stories. Victoria and Mangus' conversation about their French teacher humorously expressed their delight with being brought into the life of a special teacher -- a teacher who was probably special because she was a story teller. Stories give young people a grounding and another perspective -- one maybe less serious -- to use to reflect on their own lives. Many of the stories young people recalled provided a sense of "humor" and a form of security. Bollnow (1989) said "humor is the 'gift of the light hand' in dealing with the vulnerable child" (p. 59). Laurence (1974) shared:

> "Christie -- remember those stories you used to tell me when I was a kid?" . . .
>
> Why does she want to hear? She doesn't know. But the times when she was a kid and Christie would tell those stories, everything used to seem all right then. (p. 143)

Each time a story was told, these young people felt more part of something they trusted, and less alone in their particular worry or concern. Bollnow (1989) shared two ideas that I feel relate to this need expressed by young people. He said, "in order to develop properly children need to feel trustful of their environment" (p. 37). Much of this trust that young people felt was directly related to the openness their teachers showed towards them. Later he said, "humor means the ability to see the small worries of the child from the perspective of a certain preponderance and so to take them lightly" (p. 58). The heavy burdens and concerns these young people at times carried with them, could often begin to evaporate in a classroom where they felt they could trust the teacher.

A teacher's willingness to share his or her self can have benefits that are amazingly long term. I would like to conclude with two comments from Mark and Mangus. Mark spoke of a teacher who was "almost too stressed out" from what she was presently doing. However he went on to say, "I've known her from before, so I don't hold it against her because I know she's a nice lady." Mark was more than willing to forgive this teacher's present actions simply because in the past she had shared herself with him and he felt personally connected to her. Mangus, reflecting back on high school, said "I've met a lot of adults in the work place. People come and people go. But none have the type of respect that a teacher has from me." I don't understand completely what the basis of this respect is, however as I listened to Mangus speak throughout our conversations, I would have to believe it related to his experiencing teachers who let their vulnerabilities, their mistakes and their joys come through to their students.

At the end of the day, as we walk together in the hallway, I, the principal, might ask a teacher

> What did your students learn about you today?
> Were you comfortable sharing that?
> Why are you so willing to share with the kids?
> Did you ever have a teacher who shared like you do?
> How do you feel when others tell you stories about themselves?
> How do you connect your personal life to the curriculum you teach?

Concluding thoughts: A safe place

I began this reflection making reference to Clandinin and Connelly's (1995) statements about "the professional knowledge landscape that teachers inhabit" (p. 4) and wondering what influence principals have on both the teachers and the landscape. We have heard the messages of these young people -- messages that they want teachers and principals to hear. The questions I have posed at the end of each section have been an attempt to both begin conversation, and to let teachers know that I, the principal, think the messages of young people are important. There is no question in my mind that teachers also want to both hear and respond to these messages. It is perhaps the conflict in the multitude of messages they hear each day, that gets in the way of them being received.

Clandinin and Connelly (1995) said:

> We discuss three such desires: the desire to tell stories; the desire for relationship; and the desire to think again, to reflect on actions taken and things thought. . . . But our concern is with those who live on the professional knowledge landscape and we view them as working in a place ultimately unfriendly to the human desires we see evident in their professional work. (p. 154)

I then read the NASSP Report (1996) which concluded:

> Teachers in restructured high schools will need new knowledge about their subjects and about other subjects in the curriculum for which they formerly bore no responsibility under a curriculum that erected walls between the subjects. They must know how to engage learners by designing work of high quality and using a range of appropriate instructional strategies. They must handle expanded responsibilities for advising students and must grow more adept at collaborating with colleagues. They have to take on roles in governance by participating in site-based councils and by sitting on various school committees. Faculty members who best fulfill these new roles will influence their colleagues. (p. 103)

I cannot argue with anything I read in the quotation above. I can also almost say it is giving a message similar to the one I heard from the young people with whom I spoke. However, that would be dishonest, because there is a difference and it is more than just a linguistic difference. It is a difference based on what we value, and our beliefs about schools, young people and educators.

Earlier I wrote that

> I intend to work mostly with young people I have already established some form of relationship with, simply because it is through them that I get the best insights. Very rarely do you get at meaning issues without first developing a strong relationship.

A basic belief of mine is that a strong, positive relationship must exist between a student and a teacher if maximum learning is going to occur. This message was reinforced over and over again by the young people I talked with. It has been reinforced by my daily experiences of living and working in a large urban high school. As a principal I do find value in the NASSP quotation and I do believe that schools must strive to achieve high measurable results. I am not, however, prepared to stop there, simply because this does not adequately profile the human needs found in schools. Clandinin and Connelly's (1995) basic desires of telling stories, forming relationships and thinking again (p. 154) are as much desires of students as they are of teachers.

When we measure results or outcomes we are dealing with the issue of expectations. It is difficult to specify all the important outcomes prior to events, and often we tend to deal with those we can measure the most precisely and easily. When we look at "how" we achieve these we are more inclined to be dealing with issues of acceptability, morality and relationships -- the things of which I heard young people speak. Both are important aspects of true accountability. Sergiovanni (1995) stated:

> Defining the role of the principal [or anyone in a school] in terms of outcomes, however, increases the likelihood that means will be separated from ends. . . . The outcomes approach tends to define effectiveness more in terms of what works than what is right, and this tendency raises important moral questions. (pp. 6-7)

He goes on to suggest a values-based approach where "assumptions and beliefs presumed to be important are specified and used as a basis for deciding what it is that principals and others should do" (p. 7). Perhaps this is where insightful questioning that leads to open conversation plays an important role. Is it not proper, and absolutely necessary, for educators to collectively determine what is acceptable and unacceptable practice in schools -- practice that both impacts upon and listens to young people? It may be counter productive to only dwell on narrow outcomes, if by doing so we ignore the basic needs of staff and students that must be met in order to sustain high levels of achievement. Carver (1990) said "with respect to influencing organizational behavior, a crude measure of the right thing beats a precise measure of the wrong thing" (p. 80). Is this not our greatest challenge as principals -- to lead conversation about what are the right things to do, and then to collectively determine how well we are doing, using whatever crude measures we might establish?

Teachers make huge impacts on the lives of young people. It is our responsibility as principals to establish environments where this can comfortably, meaningfully and safely happen; environments where conversations about practice, relationships, values and beliefs can be conducted. Huggan (1987) said, "in some ways Jerry Wheeling [teacher] did become a kind of religion for me, supplanting all the old ways of seeing the world, bringing my life into a new focus" (p. 115). The young people I spoke with were looking daily for guidance in how to see the world in new ways. Most often they turned to their teachers to do this -- teachers who they knew, they trusted, they respected, and who had brought some magic to their lives.

Ross (1968) finished a wonderful short story with,

> For she [the boy's mother] had been listening, too, and she may have understood. A harvest, however lean, is certain every year; but a cornet at night is golden only once. (p. 51)

The "golden" moments of high school are the moments most often created when students and teachers are together in safe, educational places -- places of story telling, of relationships, of reflection, [and of learning] (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995, p. 161).

CHAPTER 7

A PRINCIPAL'S FORUM

McLaren (1989) spoke of schools as places "where teachers, students, and school administrators often differ as to how school experiences and practices are defined and understood" (p.186). My conversations with these 12 young people were often a sharing of how we each defined and understood high schools. Part of this was their definition and understanding of high school principals.

As I listened to them respond to the question, "What do high school students value in their principal?" several of them referred to the idea of a Principal's Forum. Tiffany referred to this as an opportunity for her principal to show that she cared about student input, and that students thought it was great even if they didn't all agree on the final decision. She explained:

> We have these Principal's Forums and I think that is really great because we get to go and have some input. We are students at the school and we should get to decide some of the things about how the school should run. I feel our principal really listens because she is always telling us, yeah that's a good idea.
>
> I remember one issue that people had some pretty strong opinions on. But she was actually willing to consider all our ideas, rather than just leave the issue and go on to something else. The decision was made finally and we didn't all agree.
>
> It was great though that she thought we might have suggestions.

Bill said that because of opportunities for input, students had very little to complain about. His comments were interesting:

> I don't feel really involved in the Students' Union issues like dances or fund raising. But, I feel like I have some say in administration issues. Like our Teacher Advisor Program. Like early Thursday dismissal. Should we keep them? Should we get rid of them?
>
> I haven't had to say much, because our principal is always involved with the students. He knows how we think. He talks to us.
>
> He also makes us fill out those Principal's Forum sheets that no one really likes! I don't think anyone really likes them, but they are needed. Because of them, and because a large majority of us give input, we don't have much to complain about.

Rebecca also provided her thoughts on how a Principal's Forum worked and the two-way respect the process created:

> Principal's Forums are good. It isn't moaning to your teacher anymore. You get to moan to who is in charge. But you have to do it in a respectful way because it is a Principal's Forum.
>
> Your class gets together, makes a list about the topic, one of us goes to the actual forum, we present our list, and we know things are going to get changed. At the forum we talk about a whole bunch of different options. The principal explains why we couldn't do some things, and what things might work.
>
> Once the principal takes the time to listen it is easier to voice our opinions. We were always sure something was going to get done, even if it's not exactly our solution. As long as we know something is going to come of it, we're okay with that.
>
> Our principal shows absolute respect for us even if it seems we have the stupidest suggestion. I remember discussing early dismissals one day, and a boy suggested we should have a late start day instead of an early dismissal. We all kind of laughed at first but the more we thought about it, the better it seemed.

A Principal's Forum is a conversation about something important. These young people, over a period of five years, had experienced nine different high school principals. They had been part of a variety of high school situations. As I worked with the tapes and the transcripts of our conversations, I returned to this format and thought about using it as a way to present these young people's views.

The following forum did not actually happen. However, the messages and language used are true to the tapes and transcripts of the individual conversations I had with these 12 young people. The Principal's Forum is presented in themes that I found after sorting through their many stories and descriptions of principals. It is my hope that this thematic conversation, is representative of how it might have sounded had all 12 young people actually been together discussing this topic. When I talked to them about presenting their views on principals in this format, they were really receptive and felt that it "sounded like them."

Welcome to this Principal's Forum. Let's sit back then and listen to these students' stories and descriptions that reflect what they value in their principal. What is each student calling us, as high school principals, to be?

Jane:

> We are allowed to have visitors in the school. Everyone is very clear as to what to do with visitors. Most of my friends go to other high schools, but they often come to pick me up, or visit at noon hour. It is a big joke because they say they see my principal more than they see their own principal. It is funny because they always just happen to see him in the halls. I know they remember this.
>
> It is important to see the principal because it establishes that relationship. You know that you are coming to a place where communication is open, you feel safe, you want to be there, and somebody cares. It's like having someone at home who says hello and wants to talk.

Carolyn also valued visibility.

> Even people who get in trouble with our principal still respect him. He doesn't make them angry at him -- he acts as if he respects everybody. A lot of people actually stay out of trouble because he deals with them in a way that keeps them from doing things again.
>
> He makes himself very known. He walks around during breaks and makes an effort to know students' names. We don't want to be on his bad side because he is such a nice person.

Mangus:

> Our principal is always around and when something happens he is there. When people need him, he is there. He is a very happy principal -- always a smile.
>
> Often at lunch I see groups of students coming up to him to talk, or he is just standing against the wall and there'll be a couple of guys talking to him.
>
> He is very open with our students, he shows them respect, he has cool ties, and he has a good time with us.

Hans shared a very specific example.

> Whenever I talk to anyone about high school I talk about the bike trips. Being on these with people, I learn more about how they act. Like our principal. He has almost a required duty at school. But he's a different person on the bike trip.
>
> I found out that he's funny and he likes to do things. I found out that he's the same as me, he's there to help me, he's there to be my friend and help us get along. I didn't see that at first.
>
> My favorite part was crazy carpeting down the mountain in my shorts. He liked it too. When I went on the bike trip I got to know him and understand what he's like.

On a personal note, Jeff shared

> one night I went shopping with a couple of my friends and I put a shirt on lay-a-way that I was going to get. I came to school the next day and my principal was wearing it. It was just really cool to see that he would choose something that I would.

> I couldn't get the shirt then, but I could relate to him because he had the same taste as me. I mean, the Hilfiger, the Polo shirts, all that kind of stuff. He dresses more like us. He has a really comfortable approach and a sense of style.
>
> The aura around him, just the message he sends out, not even by saying it, is that he is a person we can talk to if we need to.

Bill made reference to an aspect of this relationship.

> Our principal talks to us at our level. He doesn't portray himself as a super human being. He walks in the halls. He blends nicely with the students. He talks to us -- one time he told us that in his free time he referees high school football.
>
> The vending machines are at the other end of the school from his office. He has put himself in charge of these machines, which forces him to leave his office and go there a number of times a day. Because the vending machines are where most of the kids hang out, his presence is shown when he is there. They are very old machines, so when they eat up our money he has to interact with us.
>
> We don't always want to be at school, but because of the snowball effect, the respect we feel for him, we also feel towards the school.

Mark talked of his principal's approach.

> Our principal walks around and it seems like he cares about what people are doing in the school. Not just because this is his job and he is sick of all these little runts not listening and stuff.
>
> It's just a different approach and I think it changes a lot of views that kids have about their school when they're presented like that.

Michaela expanded on how this happens.

> It's almost as though there are two parts to being a principal. There's the part of the administration and all those known things that principals are to do. And then there's the other part that isn't known, the part where he goes around, he talks to students. He picks up garbage in the halls. He fights for little things that are important.

> It seems that male principals don't talk to students as much as, say, female principals. But it really makes a difference. A lot of students think our principal is cool just because he gives them the chance to get to know him.
>
> It's the second part of the job that is so important that so many people don't realize he has to do to make the place successful.

Rebecca:

> I like it when we are outside sitting on the bench and our principal comes out and says how's it going, or how are the classes, or tests going okay?
>
> I remember one day during period one spare we were outside sitting against those black doors which are great for tanning. There were a bunch of us and he came out. He said something to Naomi, he knew something about her and he talked for about two minutes. Then he went back inside, but the rest of us felt like he knew us too.
>
> We share minds. When you're 17 you share one communal mind. We're such mirrors of everybody else, so when our principal knows one of us, it's reflected on everybody else. Which is good because people just have more respect for the principal.
>
> It's really important to establish a bond with even one person in a group.

Keith spoke with a tone of surprise, in fact, shock, in his voice.

> Normally students don't really talk to principals because I guess they feel uncomfortable, probably.
>
> When I first met my principal we talked about basketball, and then we started talking about how I was doing, classes I have, and how my weekend was. It was kind of shocking because I didn't think that principals cared enough about the games to actually come to the players and say, "Good game," or ask how the team did or about the next game. And I'm like, cool, he's talking to me about this.
>
> I thought he would talk about school work, or classes, but I didn't think that he would be interested in what's happening on the basketball team. Like, after I got over the shock, it was all right!

Carolyn related a frustration.

> Last year I had to go to the library for a spare and our principal was in charge of that class. I talked a lot to him, he always wanted to argue and was a teasing kind of person. He would tell these stories that were obviously a lie, and stick to them, as if we should be believing him.
>
> But he didn't know anything about me or why I was there. He always said I should be studying more, even though he didn't know my marks were already really good. It was kind of weird -- him telling me I needed to study more when he didn't know anything about me.

Rebecca:

> Our principal always knows our names. Like, everyone's. Or, he probably knows our names, or maybe half the time he is faking, but it's really important. When the principal in a school of a 1000 kids knows your name, you think either I did something really bad or maybe he just cares.
>
> It'd be really easy for a principal to stay in the office because there's so much administrative and teacher stuff. I like it when he comes out to the pit at the end of the bell. Somehow he knows whether we have a spare, we are convinced he knows whether we have a spare, and somehow psychically he knows our schedules.
>
> You know, it's just when a teacher knows your name you can't lie to them. If our principal respects us enough to know our names then we are going to get out of the pit when we are told to, we're not going to sit around in the halls and make a mess, or we aren't going to swear in front of him.
>
> It is easier to treat him as a person.

Bill related this to the overall tone of the school.

> The more visible the principal is, the more personal the principal is, the more students respect the principal, then the more there is respect for the school and the greater school spirit.
>
> The principal is viewed as the leader and if we are shown respect by someone high up, then we normally show respect back. Because we respect our principal, we respect our school. There is hardly any vandalism. He is really visible. He knows most of us by name. Not many of us ever see him in his office during school time.
>
> He leads presentations about school rules and stuff in small settings. He comes into our classes and just stands there. It shows he is interested. It shows that he

> actually knows what is going on in classrooms. It doesn't seem like much, but it does a lot in the long run -- simply being there.

Mark followed a similar theme.

> I think our principal did a really good job because I never saw him really have to deal with problems. But he was always there walking through the hallways with a smile on his face making it seem like a comfortable place, a bit happier -- less like a jail setting!
>
> It makes a difference if the principal is happy, if he enjoys doing this, and if he likes being around us. He says hello and we say hello back. It changes the atmosphere -- it's not just a school anymore, and that's our principal who is a nice guy.
>
> Maybe it's just what we need to see -- a smile in the day to get us going and realize it ain't so bad.

Hans:

> Having a principal I can relate to, to talk to, is really great. Before, I would never, ever talk to a principal. I felt like a lowly student and there's this principal I can't talk to.
>
> My principal is totally different. I know he's serious about stuff but I still know he's a nice guy. He has authority, he's the principal, and he happens to be a nice guy. So take it as a gift, and be happy, you know.
>
> I almost always want to talk about something I am interested in. So when he joins the running team, or asks about floral arranging, or talks about movies, it's perfect because that's how relationships get built.
>
> When we hear he's coming on a field trip, it's not -- I don't know if I want to go because we may not have as much fun. It is more like when we hear one of our friends is coming -- it's not like he's waiting for the time for us to screw up. He's just there to share the experience with us.

Rebecca spoke of role models.

> I admire our principal because he just doesn't accept the bad stuff. When he basically has no tolerance for the bad things, then only the good things have a chance to get better.

> He commented on the intercom about food getting mashed into the couches. He doesn't have any tolerance for that.
>
> There is just no tolerance for racism. Just none, it is that drawing the line thing, this is just not going to happen. There were a group of girls fighting and screaming in the hall. He stepped in, dealt with it, and made it clear that this was not going to be accepted.
>
> It makes you feel safe, in a controlled environment. If the principal takes a stand on what is good and bad, then he is not going to back down for popularity reasons. He might be more popular to let us sit out in the sun instead of going to class. Skipping is not an issue simply because we are supposed to be in class.
>
> Those small moral things, and sometimes big ones are important and our principal needs to be the one to show us, and model for us because we haven't got all our brains yet. It shows personality strength, a respect for his job, and therefore respect for us, which is good.

Hans approached issues of influence and role model a bit differently.

> The way the principal does things around the school affects everyone. You notice if he sits in the office all day and doesn't do anything. You notice when he goes around, comes by a class, sits in a desk, and sees what you are learning. It trickles down.
>
> Having a good leader probably helps everyone who's following that leader become a better leader themselves.
>
> Our principal just sits down and talks to us at lunch time. It feels friendly. It isn't like we've just talked to each other, but like we've really met each other. When he does this, the teachers see it and probably even hear us talking about it. Then the teachers probably do it themselves because they know it works.
>
> When we get older and become leaders we'll know it helped us so we'll probably try it ourselves. Our elder peers were friendly and asked us about the hockey game, so we should be friendly too.
>
> Just from one principal doing it, everyone can benefit.

Michaela:

> I really think the principal can totally control the atmosphere of the school. The fact that everyone is friendly is probably developed from the principal walking

> around and being friendly with people. Principals control a lot. He controls the rules and how things are dealt with, and how people react to things that happen.
>
> Sometimes principals make up rules but they don't really enforce them. It seems like they are making the rules, but are always showing how they won't work.
>
> I remember one student decided to take it upon himself to make a bomb threat to the school, and he was dealt with very harshly. I think it was very good because it was really stupid what he did -- if he wanted to not go to school for the afternoon, then just don't go. Don't make a bomb threat. I think he was expelled from school and I got the impression that he wasn't going to be back in the school any time soon.
>
> I mean if a whole bunch of things are just slipped by and no one notices them, then people are going to think that they can do it over and over, and it doesn't make it a very safe place to be.

Mangus wrestled a bit with how this happens.

> Our principal runs the school. Even though he is soft hearted and cool to be around, he does discipline when he needs to. We all know he is friendly, but no one wants to be in trouble with him.
>
> I don't know why. Probably stories. I heard a couple of weird stories about him screaming at this guy. I don't think so, but it was a cool story.
>
> It's not necessarily fear, but there is knowledge that discipline will come if he gets a hold of us. But, he still keeps a happy face and everyone enjoys being around him.

He paused and then added,

> We'd be out having a cigarette and the bell would ring. He'd come out and be strict. He'd say do you have a class? get to it type of thing. Then I'd see him later and he didn't hold a grudge and say were you late again? He made me feel good. I knew I was wrong to be out there. He knew I was wrong too.
>
> It's not a big thing -- like it's a very minimal thing, but I am just trying to explain what I saw.

Mark also struggled a bit with this issue.

> There are such harsh measures taken if you get caught fighting at school. If it happens somewhere else nothing happens. People are usually too scared or too interested in watching to do anything. When it's over you just have to walk home, wipe the blood off, and nothing's really said about it.
>
> But at school you're suspended and your parents find out. When you're 15 that's a big deal. It's lots harsher.
>
> I think if people do anything wrong they would rather our principal catch them than anyone else. They think he will deal with them more fairly because he knows us as a person, he talks to us personally. They feel comfortable with him but they know he'll still dish out the punishment if they do something wrong.
>
> It's weird, but I don't think he has lost any authority because of it. Some might think he's the Mr. Teddy Bear, but I never felt like that.

Rebecca focused on the student-principal relationship.

> It's those little ways the kids get to know the principal. But it's never a really personal relationship. But it is a matter of knowing your principal enough to build enough respect to follow their rules, guidelines, and what not.
>
> So, then it's not because the principal doesn't like us, it's because we're smoking in the washroom. When we get caught or punished for something it often becomes a personal persecution kind of issue.
>
> We have to be more mature, but it takes awhile. And to do that we have to get to know our principal. If he's just a figurehead and all of a sudden we're kicked out of school, then it's because he hates us.
>
> It is easy to blame things on someone that you just don't know, and it's not so easy when you do.

Mark was keen to tell his experience.

> I seriously questioned what happened to my buddy John over some racial comments he made. I wrote our principal a letter because I was really mad because he kicked John out -- just booted him, and I thought it was garbage. I told him I planned to find another school for this semester.
>
> When he got the letter, he met me in the hall and asked if we could talk. So, we just sat in the custodians' area and talked. After I talked with him, my feelings

> changed and I thought this is kind of a weird situation for him to deal with. There's got to be two sides to it. I had really confused feelings after we talked.
>
> He made it feel like what I was saying to him was important. It didn't seem like he just read the letter and thought, yeah he'll be next out for bucking authority. I felt like he understood that I cared and he wanted to hear what I had to say. He said he didn't know if he had made the right decision and that what I said would be taken into consideration to improve things next time.
>
> I realized that these racial ones are really hard because you almost set the standard if anything happens again. If my buddy got away with it, how could he suspend a student a week later? I was going to leave but after we talked it changed my mind a bit, and it just seemed to be dealt with okay, everybody cooled down and it was dropped.

Jeff's perspective was perhaps more hard line.

> You can consider us like, the type of principal, when groups with power are negotiating what's going to happen next. If we want to we can get a student kicked out of school easily. We can have the same thing done as the principal would.
>
> The way we see it, if principals show us respect, we'll show them respect. But to most principals, even if we show them respect, we're just a number on the paper.
>
> Our principal has another mentality. He has his stuff in control. He knows what is going on. Even though it's not a hands-on thing, he has us under control.
>
> We wouldn't do anything in school unless it is an extreme situation. Let's put it this way. Almost all of the most violent brown guys I know are in our school. Our school is the least violent probably in all of south side. That says it all. We have so much respect for our principal because he is in the hallways, walking around and everyone sees him.

Mangus remembered a particular situation.

> I got busted for smoking pot at school and our principal was very strict with me -- a five day suspension, a contract, can't miss classes or be late, and watch myself very carefully after that. But when I got back from my suspension he still said how's it going. Like, we both knew I was wrong and the punishment was still there, but there weren't negative attitudes towards me. It was still a positive place, even after I screwed up.

> He does a very good job in keeping drugs down to a minimum. I can talk frankly. Like, I do drugs and it is very hard to get drugs at our school, almost impossible. There's always going to be someone who finds a way to get high either before they come to school, or go for a walk at lunch, or something.
>
> But the fact that there are no drugs at the school makes it very hard to do those things. It keeps it positive. That might be why there is little violence too. It is always, I feel, safe.

Michaela:

> Well I think it's obvious that teenagers are very rebellious, and I think a lot of teenagers don't really want to have anything to do with adults. It's obvious, it's part of our culture, it's the way things are.
>
> In most schools, most principals don't just say hi. It is out of the norm, people are taken back by it and they wonder, whoa, why is that guy talking to me? But as students get to know the principal better, and realize that saying hi is just a normal thing, then they start to respond to it.
>
> When our principal walks up and says hi and shows that he is concerned about us and our school and our education, we change the way we respond to him.

Keith shared,

> My principal, it seems, picked me out of all the people in the school to have my picture on a poster with the inscription that says something like, stop racism. The poster is going to be across Alberta, or maybe Canada. That's all right!
>
> And the school brochures we have to advertise the school to new students -- they always have our pictures in them, mostly grade 10s.

Rebecca added a different twist.

> I received a note from our principal after I did a speech that was prepared for the multicultural thing last year. For some teenagers to hear direct praise from an adult is sometimes very difficult to take, because you don't know how to respond.
>
> So much of high school relates to image. With a note there is less pressure, and it is something I can look back on. I feel uncomfortable being praised in front of other people. The note he gave me was handwritten, and thanked me for doing a

> good job. It was an honest reflection of what I did and an encouragement to continue doing what I did.
>
> Praise is best when you can put a specific to it, a date, a place, a time and what you did. It works for criticism and praise, both ways. Something personal -- you can always spot those fill in the blank, Xeroxed types.

Jane:

> People have to know that the principal is at the school, wants to be there, and is involved in school activities. I think if you want students to be involved in school, and to come to school, and to participate in activities, and have good attendance, and not be late, we have to see those roles modeled.
>
> Our principal is a role model for so many people. He doesn't just say all those things, he does them too. He participates. He comes to school activities, dances, or functions. People see him there and see him participate in those activities.
>
> For the students who are planning the activities, it isn't just his support that is important. It is knowing that somebody, up there, an upper level, or an authority also cares.

Tiffany had valued her principal's participation as well.

> I remember my principal coming to our volleyball games. It's nice to see principals at sporting events, supporting the teams.
>
> And this year when she made an announcement before our city playoff game. She said she was really proud of us, and that this championship was long overdue. It wasn't just a regular announcement, or just in the bulletin. It was the, excuse me for interrupting class, but. . ., type.
>
> I remember her coming out three nights in a row to see our drama play. Obviously she was proud and wanted to meet our parents. That made us feel really good.

Victoria also spoke of involvement.

> The biggest thing is that our principal is really involved with the students. He isn't the kind of principal who sits in an office all day, talking on the phone to department heads, or whatever principals do. He gets out there and he must know every student's name, it seems like. He plays for the Staff Stars.

> I think when a principal gets to know a few people on a personal level, it gives him an insight into what students are thinking about. We really got a chance to say, you guys may be thinking this, but this is what we are thinking and what's going to work for us. It makes a big difference.

Jane's was a slightly different perspective to this principal-student relationship.

> As a principal I think one of the most important things is not to favor people. If he only talks to certain people and makes them feel important, everyone else just feels completely left out.
>
> I notice my principal going out to the smoking area and talking to people. I don't know if he wants to be near the smoking area or not -- I don't know if that is a thing he wants to do -- but he is out there and the equalness is there.
>
> As a student I am really involved in this school. The girls who have lockers near me aren't really involved in school stuff and are often in the smoking area. I see my principal talking to them or I overhear them telling him about their weekend or what they are going to do that evening. They trust him enough to share these things. I see him speaking to them as he would to me, even though they aren't highly involved in school or highly academic.

Michaela:

> I've had principals who I thought were kind of phony, and I didn't really enjoy having them as principals much. By phony I mean they acted as though they really wanted to change things but it didn't seem like things were changing for the better. It means them treating me well for the wrong reasons -- because of family connections.
>
> I think a principal should treat all the students the same way -- regardless of their marks, their color, their clothes, their anything. When a principal only talks to certain people when they are in his office being disciplined, then it seems as if there are favorites in the school.
>
> The fact that he at least recognizes a face or knows the first name of most of the students in the school shows that he's talked to them and that he's concerned about all of them and not just certain ones who happen to be the higher academic students, or the ones that don't smoke.

She then added a specific example.

> Even students who come into grade 10 can easily be labeled that bad student type. But my principal doesn't do that, he gives them a chance. People really like being given second chances, because along the way everyone's going to make a mistake here and there.
>
> I have spoken to Jimmy. I didn't know him in grade 10, but from what I've picked up he wasn't the most dedicated student and seemed to be into some trouble every now and then. He told me how important he thought our principal was, and how much he appreciated him for helping him along the way. Jimmy said that even when he was in trouble our principal found a kind way to tell him his thoughts. I know he was on the swim team and our principal was the coach, and one day Jimmy didn't have any swimming trunks, so he brought him a pair -- and some goggles too. He was absolutely thrilled.
>
> It is the little things that show he cares along the way that get students thinking.

Jeff felt quite strongly about this issue.

> Our principal knows who is who in the school. He doesn't discriminate against anybody, but he knows who would be causing trouble. I can just tell he knows, but he doesn't pass judgments on it. He keeps an eye on us, he has a stern -- you slip up, I'll set you in the right direction type attitude. He has it together. We feel comfortable with him knowing, and obviously he doesn't know EVERYTHING that is going on.
>
> Even though he knows we are trouble makers, he'll help us out if we need it. He'd still be there if we had to get some help off him. Like Jake, he got into some trouble, and he helped him out for some reason. I can't remember exactly what it was and he's in house arrest so I can't ask him. It provides us with a sense that even though we had caused trouble, our principal would help us out.

Jane spoke of how principals deal with students saying,

> My principal treats us with respect, I find. He doesn't lecture us, he doesn't tell us what to do, he treats us like adults. It isn't get to class! It is, where should you be? He sort of gives that final decision up to us. He seems to be so much on our level. He respects us, he tells us things, he isn't better than us because he is older, he isn't the person who sits in the office.
>
> But I still want to call him Mr. Williams, not Matt. I wouldn't feel it is appropriate, personally, because we're not the same.

Carolyn:

> Everybody knows that they can go and talk to our principal if they have a problem with a teacher or anything. It's just when we go and talk to him, he really spends the time to make sure that we know that it is important for him that he can talk to us. The word gets around. Just by this happening over and over again, other students figure out that they can go and do the same thing.
>
> That's the only way it can happen because he can't really go around and tell us we can come to talk to him. Not everybody's going to have something that they want to talk about to him. He gives the time and listens. He sets a priority to do the things that students want, before all the office stuff.
>
> Like timetables. He does his very best to work them out in a way that we want, but he won't let us do something that doesn't make sense.

Victoria:

> Sometimes it was just the little things our principal does or says that make me realize he has confidence in me. He feels that I can do anything.
>
> I remember in grade 11 when we published an anthology in English 20. I did an essay on why teachers make such a big deal about skipping a class. For some reason I didn't think he would read it, but he did. He came up to me in the hallway and said you know you raised some valid points in that essay. I thought, hey, that was cool. He wasn't encouraging me to skip, but he also didn't say, I can't believe you wrote that.
>
> He doesn't put restrictions on people, he really lets students help shape the school.

Jane shared a specific example.

> I really love our library, but with all the computers typing and printing, it's not going to be quiet. However, I wanted to have a completely quiet place to study. I knew the halls were to be quiet and we weren't supposed to be in them during class time.
>
> I knew that was our rule, but I would go and break the rule and sit in the hall just because it was quiet. So I mentioned it to a bunch of students, and we asked our principal if he could open up an area for completely quiet study.

> We got the room upstairs -- I don't know how much use it gets, I don't see many people using it. But it is still there for people, it is quiet, and I felt someone listened to me and it had happened.

Keith, seeing the role a principal plays in a school, said,

> When we knew our principal was leaving they asked us what we would look for in our new principal. At first I wondered why they were asking us, because we're not hiring anybody. It was cool because all the teachers started interacting with the kids and talking about it. We all actually cared about who we got for a principal.
>
> We've got a great new principal. I don't know if we had anything to do with that or if the school board decided, but they asked our opinion first. I think that's good.

Victoria stated,

> Our principal is concerned about the students and how we are feeling at school. It is just a feeling I get that the administration really wants us to be happy.
>
> If there is a problem he tries to get students together to help solve that problem. He doesn't just leave it up to the administration.
>
> And when he has something where he wants the students involved, he asks all sorts of students from all sorts of areas. He doesn't just stay with the same students.

Carolyn, had had a different experience.

> No, actually I didn't feel respected by my last principal. He kind of thought of us as little kids who should stay out of the administration stuff because we didn't know anything about it. He really had his own ideas and there was no way to change that.
>
> Even if we wrote letters and got them signed by a whole bunch of people, he would just ignore them. I think the teachers were even feeling that he was really ignoring them too. They would say you can't tell your teachers anymore because he's not listening to us. They said don't talk to us because we can't do anything either.
>
> But he wouldn't listen to the students either.

Mangus shared a time where he felt heard, in a more formalized sense.

> I was part of an interview committee for some second language teachers. There were two students and we both got to ask our personal questions. It was quite a novel concept that I'd never heard of before but it made me feel really good.
>
> From a student's perspective it's good to know what a teacher's going to do when he comes in. You can tell by a guy's answer if he would scream and shout. We sat down after every interview and we just ran through our notes. I definitely felt they listened to our opinions.

Keith's comment adds a different twist.

> Our principal actually gets input from us about how we feel and stuff like that. Like the smoking area. I guess there was some problem because some people were smoking inside the doors when it was cold. I guess some teachers were really ticked off because the smoke traveled down the corridor and in the classrooms.
>
> She asked us about the smoking area, if we should have it, and stuff. Because it came from the office, it seemed like she cared whether we smoked or not. We had a say in something. Not just a -- who cares what they think, we'll just make the decision ourselves -- type thing.

Tiffany remembered the first day in her present school.

> When I first went to this school instead of just being transferred over, I actually went into the principal's office and we talked for a really long time. He asked me how I would do in school, what I could contribute, was I willing to work hard, and stuff like that.
>
> About a month later he called me down to his office and he checked up just to make sure everything was going good. It made me feel really good because I just felt like he cared about my learning and my happiness. It was really good because someone was actually recognizing me.

Carolyn:

> Our principal notices individually someone doing well in school. He signs everybody's report cards and write comments on them. He makes an effort to see us in the halls and congratulate us or say something about our achievements. I really appreciate this -- he doesn't have to do it. He is just doing it to be nice.

> I won an award last year and I think he was the person who nominated me. I don't even know how he has any idea of anything that is going on in my life, but he tries to know what activities everyone's involved in.

Tiffany shared her appreciation for a focus on education.

> My principal is really focused on education. It is nice to come to a school where the principal is really set on certain goals. It makes you want to strive for the best you can be.
>
> At the beginning of each semester she meets with a couple of classes at a time to focus on us and our school. We are made to feel welcome, encouraged to do a really good job, find out what's going on, and told how we can get help if we need it.
>
> Then we have a couple of get togethers with our coordinators during the year and they read out our name if we got honors or really good attendance. They really make you feel good because we'd get candy bars, vouchers and certificates.
>
> I think that our principal thinks students deserve to be rewarded and so she sets these things up. It's really nice.

Michaela took this idea even farther.

> I think our principal has a lot of influence on how the teachers treat us within the courses. I mean, if teachers are asked by him to do everything possible to help us, they're a lot more likely to do so than if he really doesn't give them any direction as to how he wants classes to go. When he tells us at assemblies that all teachers will return all assignments within a week, then it is likely to happen.
>
> By the way teachers treat us, provide extra help, show they care, and respect us, it is obvious that they have been encouraged at staff meetings and that kind of place to do certain things to make us want to work. Lots of my friends got to go to the first part of staff meetings when each subject would have time for kids to show the staff what we were doing. We felt important and listened to.
>
> It was always neat around Christmas -- most of our teachers would wear bells around their necks. They said our principal read them a story about looking for different ways to listen for bells on Santa's sleigh. It kind of made it nice around the school.

Rebecca:

> It's the first impression of the principal that counts.
>
> When he does the grade 9 orientations where there's speeches and the band plays. If he is a stand-up comedian and really lax, then that's our first impression. We walk into grade 10 and grade 10 is all about testing the rules. On the other hand if he gets up there and has a whip or something, that's bad. You can just tell these things.
>
> It's totally first impression as it is with everybody.

Tiffany felt her principal reflected a lot of what her school is.

> I notice that our principal is really proud of our school because whenever he sees garbage he picks it up and makes it look nice. He is kind of just saying, hey look at our school. We're really good and be proud of it.
>
> When we see him in the hall, he always kind of has a smile on his face. I think he likes the school and likes being there.
>
> And we always have visitors in our school. Some come to speak to us for special events and spirit rallies. And some would stay in our school like the Japanese students. We also get to tour people around the school and it seems that he wouldn't invite these people unless he was really proud of the school. We always know when visitors are coming because the announcements ask us to make them feel welcomed.
>
> Most of the people in our school are really polite and when they see visitors they are willing to say hi. We wouldn't want to fool around when visitors are here because we don't want to embarrass our school or our principal or our teachers, because we have respect for them.

Victoria spoke of celebration and of ceremony.

> Just the look on our principal's face when he came into the atrium was great. A lot of students came in just behind him and everyone was just grinning, just clapping and cheering.
>
> He had really made me feel I could do anything. I think a lot of the students felt that way.

> We gave him a big card and named part of the school after him. He'd put so much into the school, we couldn't just forget him. We were sad to see him go. Definitely. But happy to see that the principal who had shaped our lives was now going on to shape even more people's lives.
>
> It's important for a principal to touch a student's life and make them feel like they can do anything.

She then went on to say,

> We gave our principal a picture of six of us with him at grad. When I saw the picture I thought we really should give this to him because he has been a big part of our high school years. My close friends all realized that it was important that we do well and that we could do well.
>
> When he handed me my diploma at the Jubilee Auditorium, I just thought, wow, this is the principal who really helped shape my life. I was getting my diploma and I felt so proud that day.

The conversation seemed to be slowing down, and the time running out. I was about to finish off and thank these young people for participating. I had learned a lot and appreciated the insights of their stories. However, Mangus had one thing to add:

> Our principal basically set up the school with the help of other people, of course. Because of the positive environment, we felt the creation was good.
>
> Then, you know, maybe the creator is good too.

The 12 young people left. It had been good to hear their stories and comments. The passion and sincerity in what each of them said remained with me. They had given me new insights and opened new possibilities. I wondered, how does what they said relate to me, and to my experiences as a principal? It was time to explore this connection.

CHAPTER 8

HALL TALK?

Praxis

As I began conversing with high school students about what they value in their principal, I realized that the conversations I was having were a form of reflective practice, a personal and ongoing process in which I was consciously choosing to take part. While participating in these conversations, I had also paused to wonder about the qualities of the "landscape" (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995) in which principals find themselves. Carr (1986) referred to the present as "a vantage point which opens into future and past" (p. 60). To me, this meant using today, the moment of reflection, to make sense of the past, in order to create a better and brighter future -- an opening up of hope or a sense of "trust in the future" (Bollnow, 1989, p. 52).

Simply by being in schools as leaders, we daily work to make sense of that which we are a part. Ackerman, Donaldson and Van der Bogert (1996) referred to principals as "*sense makers*" for their schools (p. 1) and as "leaders who seek to learn and to invent through questioning" (p. 3). I tend to believe that it is when we bring this reflection to a conscious level that real reflective practice happens. Hodgkinson (1991) stated, "the conscious practice of administration, as opposed to the merely mechanical, the laissez-faire, or the unsophisticated is what is properly called *praxis*" (p. 111).

I hope that this reflection can properly be called “praxis.” What have my experiences as a high school principal, the conversations with young people, and the variety of readings I’ve done told me about the relationship between high school students and their principals? Using my personal journal as the basis for reflection, I will try to blend these pieces together in a way that is meaningful to me. What these young people have said and what I have read, can for me, only be set in a context with which I am familiar and in which I am present. My hope is that perhaps my experiences will seem in some ways familiar to others -- especially others in the principalships of our high schools.

A difference

May 13, 1997 – 7:30 p.m.: I went to Matt's and Jessica's school this morning as a parent to give blood. The CALM classes had set this up with the Red Cross. I could hardly get in, it was so busy -- huge turn out from kids and staff and community.

I was really impressed with the care the kids who were helping gave me. Had fun chatting with kids as I rested. Different feeling than being their principal.

Must call school and congratulate them. Told several kids that the first time I gave blood was when my high school made the effort to organize it for us. Mostly, I remember being horrified that they would take my blood, realize I had some terrible socially unacceptable disease and announce it to everyone!

I could almost feel the tension this morning of the kids waiting, for a first time, to give blood. I think it takes real guts on the part of kids to do this today and go through the whole barrage of AIDS questions. These kids impressed me.

After almost a full year of not being their principal, my visit with these young people had been considerably different. During their farewell activity for me in June of 1996, I was asked to speak, but I just couldn’t. It was at that point in the proceedings that I heard the loudest, most sustained cheering of the day. In five years they had seen me do many things, but never before had I cried in front of them. Later I had heard, "even the big macho grade 12 guys were crying !" It made me feel better!

Noddings (1984) said, "the teacher, as one-caring, meets the student directly but not equally" (p. 177). I think the principal, while meeting students directly, is seen as being in an even more unequal relationship. A year ago the action of me crying had crossed a barrier that existed -- a barrier that separated these young people from me. For me it had been okay in the context of a farewell celebration, but I doubt if I'd have felt it was acceptable in another situation. At the blood donor clinic that morning, I simply wasn't their principal. While I hoped I wouldn't pass-out or anything, it really didn't matter. I was just another person, a father to one of their friends. There was a difference.

As an outsider I had noticed something else. Sergiovanni (1992) said, "sacred authority is expressed as faith in the authority of community, professional norms, school norms, and ideals" (p. 312). These young people's actions of giving, of serving, and of being responsible at the clinic were truly coming from a sense of sacred authority that was based within the students and staff of the school. I could see that. I wondered if the present principal could. I wondered if I could, had I still been the principal living within the situation.

Office work?

June 28, 1996 -- 7:15 a.m. I am sitting at my desk in my office. The sunlight is flowing through the windows. As I look around, I realize that I will be moving the "me" from this office in two days time.

I have come to really love this spot. It feels comfortable and it feels like me — modern, clean furniture; some of my favorite pieces of art; interesting posters from my kids; family and school events photographs; a stick-person drawn by Matt on the white board; and the usual full bulletin area above my desk.

In many ways this room has become my retreat, my place of solitude. It is where I work quietly very early in the morning, and then once again at the end of the day. It is where I do all those things which no one really knows are done, unless they aren't. Somehow, even though it is in the midst of a building holding 1000 people, it is a private place, a personal place of mine.

Sure it has been the location of many meetings, many one-on-ones with staff, many chats with parents and students, and a number of very close and personal times with many people. Still it is a different place to me, than it is for everyone else. It is my home -- everyone else is a visitor. Visitors who I hope have been treated well, but still visitors.

My candy dish on the table that seems always empty is an indication that many people travel through each day and comfortably up their sugar content.

Yes, this office is something different for me than it is for anyone else.

The principal's office is an interesting creation and one that got very little mention from the 12 students I had conversations with. There seemed an underlying belief that principals whom they valued did the things that principals do in their offices and that the schools operated smoothly as a result. Michaela acknowledged this with, "it's almost as though there are two parts to being a principal. There's the part of the administration and all those known things that principals are to do . . ." Carolyn's statement that, "he sets a priority to do the things that students want, before all the office stuff," also acknowledged this office work, but clearly placed it as lower in importance to work with students. Very little of the connectedness of students with their principal, however, happened in the office of the principal. Tiffany was the only one of the 12 who made a positive reference to her principal's office. She said,

> When I first went to this school instead of just being transferred over, I actually went into the principal's office and we talked for a really long time. . . . About a month later he called me down to his office and he checked up just to make sure everything was going good.

Almost a stereotype of what the principal does in the office was noted by three students. Victoria shared, "He isn't the kind of principal who sits in an office all day, talking on the phone to department heads, or whatever principals do." Jane said, "He respects us, he tells us things, he isn't better than us because he is older, he isn't a person who sits in the office." Hans connected it to an issue of modeling when he said, "The way the principal does things around the school affects everyone. You notice if he sits around in the office all day and doesn't do anything."

One student, Michaela, referred to the disciplinary aspect of the principal's office, when she said, "if a principal only talks to certain people when they are in his office being disciplined, then it seems as if there are favorites in the school." The office belongs to the principal and had little or no part in what these students said they valued in their principal.

The dream

December 20, 1991: It is 3:20 p.m. and I almost feel like I'm becoming a non-feeling zombie. I've had to make some tough decisions this month and though I don't like making them, I certainly am not losing sleep over them.

The kids' Christmas concert today was incredible. Some amazing talent shown by kids. I was pretty uptight during it – manners of kids, but they pulled through not too badly. I feel embarrassed by them at times.

A couple of kids told me last week it was easier before I came here – no one expected as much of them. I guess that's fair.

The numbness I feel worries me -- there is so much good that can happen that isn't. Please don't let me ever accept this level of mediocrity.

Reading Deal and Peterson's (1994) discussion of paradox gave me insights into what principals do and how they relate. They stated:

> *The paradox of concern:* acting in a caring way may not mean the leader is always caring. The leader is tender and cares for individuals. The leader is tough and cares about the organization. (p. 47)

I felt that everything I was doing was being watched very carefully. Hans' comment that "his principal has almost a required duty at school" reminded me of what I was doing. The second part of his comment, "but he's different on the bike trip," perhaps represented something I learned quickly. I had to make the effort to be part of the good things that were happening. I had to both care for individuals and the school. "Values are communicated in everything a school leader does, writes, and speaks," (Deal & Peterson, 1994, p. 86). I could certainly feel that. I felt that responsibility outlined in the NASSP Report (1996) that the principal "is the keeper of the dream" (p. 100).

Generosity

July 2, 1992 -- 12:08 p.m.: I am finished. We hit the skies tonight. Boy do I feel tired.

I want so much for all the pieces to come together well and for this school to look perfect for kids. I must keep reality and vision both in mind. We can make a difference.

I am tired of this place right now. I hope and pray for a better 1992-93. I'd like to have fun and build, instead of destroy.

I wonder now, if my wanting the school to look perfect was also a desire for me to look perfect as well. I further wonder if something that looks perfect to me, would indeed look perfect to the kids. When Keith said, "because it came from the office, it seemed like she cared whether we smoked or not," I think he could have been talking about any issue or topic. Most important in his message is that the principal does have some special authority that is directly related to the school, and that it can be used positively. I think this is part of what Noddings (1984) meant in her statement, "the meetings between teacher as teacher and student as student are necessarily and generously unequal" (p. 67). The "generously" aspect of this is important. A principal has many things other people do not have in the school -- opportunities, perspectives, time, information, and connections. How generous he or she is with these makes the difference. Rebecca asked that her principal be generous with his time.

> He knew something about her and he talked for about two minutes. . . . When our principal knows one of us, it's reflected on everybody else. Which is good because people just have more respect for the principal.

Even two minutes made a difference. Bill's request was generosity with power, when he said, "our principal talks to us at our level. He doesn't portray himself as a super human being."

Reminders

January 31, 1993 -- 5:00 p.m.: January had some good times, but it was dominated by the stabbing and the expulsions. What a huge trauma -- from the work with the press, to dealing with the kids, to providing information on the expulsion to the board, to helping staff deal with issues. I felt horribly betrayed by these kids and really had to search within myself for strength to keep plugging ahead.

I got lots of positive feedback on the way I handled the entire thing, but I felt no satisfaction with it at all.

I certainly love and admire our staff.

The grade 12s hit me with a note today -- Mr. McPhee you are officially not invited to Grad. I guess there's still lots of negative hang-over from before. Won't let it bug me too much -- but it does.

Dryden (1995) shared some wonderful insights about schools and power. "The whole place is a tinderbox" (p. 106) and "a school is such a fragile place," (p. 45) both speak to the fine balance of life in a high school where power must be respected. This stabbing was one of two very dangerous situations I dealt with in five years. Both required not only many external actions on my part and others, but a lot of inner searching. That strong bond that I felt with the school was very real. When the school was hurt, or an individual injured, then it personally hurt me.

Was I being too tough or was it that I wasn't tough enough for this job? Mitchell (1947) talked about this:

> "The trouble with you," said Digby [principal], "is that you're too thin-skinned. You're tender. That's no good if you're a minister -- or a school teacher. You've got to be tough -- good and tough. I'm tough. You're not." (p. 64)

I really wasn't sure. I wasn't even sure if how I felt and how I was perceived weren't complete opposites. Looking back today, there were probably some who thought of me as "the dim-witted bat's fart who's principal of our school" (Vanderhaeghe, 1982, p. 83).

The note from the grad class probably related to a perception of me and could be put into the context of Carolyn's remark when she said, "but he didn't know anything about me or why I was there. . . . It was kind of weird -- him telling me I needed to study more when he didn't know anything about me." I was so involved in making a change, that I simply wasn't taking the time to get to know those who had been there the longest; those who had the most to lose; or those who felt they had already lost, because of me. Going back to Dryden (1995) he said, "because Cathy [teacher] has power, she sometimes forgets she has it. Because the kids don't, they never forget" (p. 14). As principals we have huge amounts of power, but sometimes we forget this. Students who don't feel they have that power, never forget.

A moral tone

March 15, 1993 – 4:00 p.m.: My constant frustration relates to kids' behavior and level of maturity. I'm going to get some help from consulting services to shadow me -- to help me really figure out what I'm up to.

Almost at the same time I am beginning to feel a change in the air. The stabbing -- it has drawn us together. It's like something big happened and we all realized that this school is important to all of us. It seemed the kid's rage was as deep as mine. Great PR done by kids about our school.

I must continue to remember that we have many wonderful young people.

Bollnow (1989) said, "the child's moral power is dependent on the trust which the environment and especially the educators bestow on the child" (p. 42). The Canadian Education Association Report (1995) stated, "the expectations for students' behavior have social and moral overtones" (p. 71). The tone of the school is something young people know the principal can influence. Michaela stressed, "I really think the principal can totally control the atmosphere of the school. . . . He controls the rules and how things are dealt with, and how people react to things that happen." Carolyn said, "a lot of people actually stay out of trouble because he deals with them in a way that keeps them from doing things again." The school, led by the principal, sets a tone as portrayed by Lim (1989) who wrote, "my school . . . had a reputation of fairness towards the Chinese. The teachers did not discriminate between pupils of different backgrounds. This was rare then when our people were called 'the yellow peril'" (p. 41).

Mark contemplated the example set by each decision made by his principal when he stated, "I realized that these racial ones are really hard because you almost set the standard if anything happens again. If my buddy got away with it, how could he [principal] suspend a student a week later." Michaela saw the principal as the person to set this process in motion. She said, "when our principal walks up and says hi and shows that he is concerned about us and our school and our education, we change the way we respond to him." These young people wanted their principal, and expected their principal, to set the moral tone of the school. If he or she doesn't do it, who will? In some interesting ways I feel they also appreciated the tensions and opposing pressures felt by their principal on a day-to-day basis.

Personal connections

June 29, 1993: I sit for the last time in my temporary office, everything packed up in boxes. This little office has been okay – a bit hot and stuffy, but generally okay. The year is coming to an end and that is okay too.

I still concern myself with student behavior – thus the big effort on the Code of Ethics.

The kids had a wonderful farewell to staff who didn't receive contracts – really nice and all done by them. I am impressed with our staff and will really miss those who are leaving.

We hosted the student leadership conference last month and kids did a wonderful job of leading and being fine ambassadors for the school.

As I rate the year, I give it a stanine six, perhaps seven. We've come a long way. The growth now needs to come from me and I need to appreciate me in this setting.

I was beginning to realize that how young people see their school was very closely linked with how they saw the adults in the school and particularly their principal. There is a powerful connection here. Consistent with Deal and Peterson (1994) who said, "the primary mission of the principal and other school leaders is to create and reinforce a culture that provides both meaning and movement," (p. 6) I heard very powerful statements from the young people with whom I talked.

Rebecca thought it was the first impression of the principal that determined how students approached their new high school in grade 10. She stated, "it's totally first impression as it is with everybody." Jeff perhaps made the strongest statement, when he said, "we wouldn't do anything in school unless it is an extreme situation. . . . We have so much respect for our principal because he is in the hall, walking around and everyone sees him." There is no question that the principal can exert substantial control over what happens in a school and that students both want and expect this.

The connection between high school students and staff continued to intrigue me. Bollnow's (1989) comment that, "children have a special need; they want to admire and honor their teacher" (p. 35) and Deal and Peterson's (1994) comment, "all people have heroes and heroines whom they try to emulate," (p. 86) forced me to think about the principalship differently. Kids want to be recognized by adults, but more than that they want to be around adults whom they admire.

A principal really doesn't have to do a whole lot to be admired. Rebecca expressed this simply when she said, "I received this note from our principal." Carolyn provided a specific example when she shared that

> our principal notices individually someone doing well in school. He signs everybody's report cards and writes comments on them. He makes an effort to see us in the halls and congratulate us or say something about our achievements.

Both students recognized the effort made and it was special to them. It may also relate to their own desire to recognize adults who have influenced them or whom they admire. There is a distance maintained between students and adults in the school, but there is an intimacy about this distance. It may relate to Van Manen's (1986) thought that, "the teacher serves the child by observing from very close proximity while still maintaining distance" (p. 19).

Thoughtful distance

December 17, 1993 – 4:00 p.m.: The last week before Christmas went very well. Kids were generally great.

Had all staff and students involved in a process of determining what we are doing really well and what needs to be changed – it went well.

Kids have settled in and good things are happening in the classroom. Some feeling that we need to work on overall school spirit. It will come with some small activities on a regular basis.

The kids are really nice and even the tough ones are neat, when I take the time to talk to them. December has been a positive month for me.

Van Manen (1986) referred to "the ability of a principal to enter into the world of a child is thoughtfulness" (p. 10). Over and over again I heard young people honoring the fact that their principal tried to understand them, respected what they thought and simply listened. Victoria told about her principal who "came up to me in the hallway and said you know you raised some valid points in that essay." The fact that she mentioned this shows its significance to her. Rebecca talked about her principal listening when she said, "you get to moan to who is in charge. But you have to do it in a respectful way because it is a Principal's Forum."

Students wanted this contact but almost didn't expect it. Keith was quite taken back at first. He said, "normally students don't really talk to principals because I guess they feel uncomfortable, probably. It was kind of shocking." When the occasion arose for Hans, he stated, "before, I would never, ever talk to a principal. I felt like a lowly student and there's this principal I can't talk to."

I, as a principal, am the person who must take the first move to bridge this gap. If I don't it may not be bridged or connected to everyone's advantage. It's an odd relationship. Rebecca shared two different perspectives. First, she said

> it's those little ways the kids get to know the principal. But it is never a really personal relationship. But it is a matter of knowing your principal enough to build enough respect to follow their rules, guidelines, and what not. . . . And to do that we have to get to know our principal. If he's just a figurehead . . ."

Even though the relationship isn't "personal" there is a need to "know" the principal. Perhaps partly why it can't be personal relates to a power Rebecca alluded to in her second reference to her principal. She said, "somehow he knows whether we have a spare, we are convinced he knows whether we have a spare, and somehow psychically he knows our schedules." This is pretty powerful stuff! The principal views the scene from a distance, thoughtfully. As he does this both the distance and the thoughtfulness become part of the relationship.

Balance

April 5, 1994 -- 4:25 p.m.: I don't think I am that keen on March. It is an odd month in a high school. It is the month of selling -- the month that always makes me feel inadequate and compared.

Our Open House was really excellent -- a stellar evening

Kids were really fine in March. I really like them. Personal Excellence Reports -- some kids doing very well, other are having real problems.

Right now attendance and retention for the year just isn't good enough. I've spent much time this month trying to focus on good things. We must look at growth as opposed to always looking at what we are not doing.

Great Citizenship Court here. Track and field has started. Soccer really active.

I saw myself needing to continue building a balance both within me and within the school. The balance between clearly showing what was acceptable and not acceptable; and providing opportunities for young people to be truly set up for success. No wonder, I felt compared at this time of year. Being a Principal is about recruiting, and recruiting is at least partly about selling both atmosphere and opportunities.

The young people I talked to very clearly expected their principal to set a tone to their school -- something that they could be part of. They almost wanted something that they could grasp on to for security. Starratt (1996) stated, "unacceptable behavior will be seen, not so much as breaking a rule imposed by the administration, but as failing to live up to a value that is cherished by the community" (p. 100).

Michaela talked about her principal as fighting for little things that are important, and Rebecca clearly stated, "those small moral things, and sometimes big ones are important and our principal needs to be the one to show us, and model for us because we haven't got all our brains yet." Mangus specifically discussed drugs when he said,

> he does a very good job in keeping drugs down to a minimum. . . .That might be why there is little violence too. . . . Even though he is soft hearted and cool to be around, he does discipline when he needs to. . . . It's not necessarily fear, but there is knowledge that discipline will come if he gets a hold of us.

Perhaps this is related to a teacher's comment in the Canadian Education Association Report (1995) who said, "the most effective way to deal with behavior problems is to create an atmosphere where you don't have any" (p. 148). What a challenge! How close can we get to that in a large urban high school?

Recognition

October 31, 1994 – 5:00 p.m.: An absolutely outstanding dance was planned by our student council – the kids had fun, the music was good and no problems.

Had a wonderful Awards night early in month. Staff planning group was great.

Our teams are doing very well – our first ever football victory; swimming and cheerleading are growing; and senior boys and junior girls volleyball have picked up tremendously.

Young people are almost begging us to take the time to recognize them -- particularly recognition from principals, who are seen as having some special authority. Very generally, Victoria shared, "it's important for a principal to touch a student's life and make them feel like they can do anything." She had many good relationships with her teachers and friends, but wanted something special from her principal. Tiffany saw her principal's attendance at student events as a sign of pride when she shared, "I remember my principal coming to our volleyball games. . . . I remember her coming out three nights in a row to see our drama play. Obviously she was proud and wanted to meet our parents." Jane was the most direct of all when she said, "it is knowing that somebody, up there, an upper level, or an authority also cares." Upper authorities, like principals, have greater responsibilities as well, with young people.

I was profoundly affected reading Avi (1991), specifically this entry from the diary of a student, Philip Malloy:

> Things stink. And it's all so unfair. Nobody takes my side. They all think Narwin's [English teacher] great. Nobody pays any attention to what she did to me. Coach Jamison won't let me on the team.
>
> I hate that school. (p. 199)

Clearly, Philip felt that nobody had listened. That was his perception. It may or may not have been the case.

Learning

January 31, 1995 -- 3:00 p.m.: Semester One is over -- our first total semester. We successfully made it through the examinations and the first ever Diploma 30 level courses. We used technology in our English exams.

I think the kids took their exams very seriously and it was wonderful to see so many feeling so successful.

> An effective principal must inspire and lead by example. He or she should be a defender of academic integrity. Ultimately, a principal's actions must demonstrate a commitment to learning and a respect for teachers and staff. A principal should be capable of creating a climate conducive to good schooling. (NASSP Report, 1996, p. 101)

Principals influence the learning that happens in a high school. Michaela reinforced this with, "I think our principal has a lot of influence on how the teachers treat us within courses," and Hans strongly stated, "having a good leader probably helps everyone who's following that leader become a better leader themselves." When Michaela added, "by the way teachers treat us, provide extra help, show they care, and respect us, it is obvious that they have been encouraged at staff meetings and that kind of place to do certain things to make us want to work," it reinforced Deal and Peterson (1994) who said, "meetings also provide important ritual exchanges that connect people to each other and their shared mission" (p. 66). Principals were seen by these young people as setting a tone for learning. They held their principals accountable for making learning possible.

Fairness

April 28, 1995 -- 5:50 p.m.: Social Studies people put on a great Elimination of Discrimination Conference awhile back. Some wonderful insights into a variety of issues. A few hot feelings arose, but . . . . It was a fine celebration and kids response was very meaningful.

Floor hockey final happened -- lots of excitement and energy.

Our kids did fabulously in the Science Fair and we make up half the team going to Nationals -- this has done a lot for mentorship.

Schools are full of young people -- young people who are not simply students in courses, but people who hope to be recognized for being themselves. Van Manen (1986) stated, "being seen is more than being acknowledged. For a child it means *experiencing* being seen by the *teacher*. It means being confirmed as existing, as being a person and a learner" (p. 21). The principal can be central to this recognition. Jeff nicely described his principal as having, "a really comfortable approach. The aura around him, just the message he sends out, not even by saying it is that he is a person we can talk to if we need to." The principal, not the student, is first to send out a message that, "I am here for you."

There may be some further meanings here as well. Noddings' (1984) statement seemed to relate closely with another set of ideas expressed by these young people. She stated, "the actions of one-caring will be varied rather than rule-bound; that is, her actions, while predictable in a global sense, will be unpredictable in detail" (p. 24). When Keith shared that, "my principal picked me out of all the people in the school to have my picture on a poster with the inscription that says something like, stop racism," he alluded to his principal also sharing what was important to her. Her actions gave a clear picture of the principles which she valued. Takashima's (1971) "on the first day, Sister St. Rita, our principal, spoke to us: 'We will respect the religion of each of you and we ask you to respect ours'" (p. 7) is perhaps another example of a predictable global action. Once again a principal pointed out her guiding principles and established a sense of fairness in the school.

Young people find the issue of actions being "unpredictable in detail" more perplexing. Ricci (1993), through the memories of a young boy, pointed this out, when speaking of the school principal:

> In the school yard I saw how he'd laugh and joke with the same boys who picked on me on the bus, because they played on the school teams he coached, and his kindness then seemed merely a sort of stupidity, something that kept him from seeing the things that were most important about people.
>
> Or perhaps I was the one who missed what was important, the simple goodness of [the principal], a way things were that my own contamination kept me from understanding. (p. 58)

While his actions were based on an underlying principle of making the most of each individual, they seemed "merely a sort of stupidity" viewed from the perspective of this child. He may have seen his principal's actions as being unfair. Jeff, who perhaps could be seen by other students as one of those "boys who picked on me" told about actions that were unpredictable when he said his principal, "doesn't discriminate against anybody, but he knows who would be causing trouble. . . . Even though he knows we are trouble makers, he'll help us out if we need it." Finally, Jane in a very general way, placed this issue in perspective -- "as a principal I think one of the most important things is not to favor people. If he only talks to certain people and makes them feel important, everyone else just feels left out." These students saw their principals as responsible -- responsible for modeling the principle of recognizing and acknowledging every person, but doing this in a personalized, non-rule bound, and perhaps, unpredictable fashion. Fairness had more to do with the consistent recognition of students as individuals, than it did with giving everyone the same or equal treatment.

Ceremony

June 2, 1995: Now it's 4:30 p.m. on a beautiful afternoon when the kids all got muddy during Mud Volleyball. It was incredibly well organized and I give hats off to the staff and students for organizing it.

Grad was spectacular -- the banquet, the dance, the ceremony. The kids performed so well and with a great deal of class and dignity. I am very proud of this our first class through.

There are a lot of day-to-day and also special activities that happen in the school. They are organized and implemented by a variety of people. Many jobs around the school can be fulfilled by almost anyone. There are others, perhaps the rituals, that only the principal can fulfill. Victoria alluded to this ceremonial aspect.

> When he handed me my diploma at the Jubilee Auditorium, I just thought, wow, this is the principal who really helped shape my life. I was getting my diploma and I felt so proud that day.

Many people had shaped her life in high school. Probably many, much more so than her principal. It was however important for her to connect her high school, her diploma, and her graduation with her principal.

Celebration

December 22, 1995: It's 2:45 p.m., I'm out in the halls and it is quite quiet. The music students who put on a wonderful concert last week have been performing all day -- in the office and drama room.

Basketball is picking up, and senior team is doing quite well.

Overall it has been the most peaceful last week of classes before Christmas -- with really good attendance.

There is a feeling that one feels when entering any school. You hear people comment on this all the time. Listening to students, I heard them saying that this feeling about the school was linked to the principal. Mark's statement that, "it makes a difference if the principal is happy. . . . It changes the atmosphere" or Mangus', "he is a very happy principal -- always a smile," related to a mood of joy or comfort in the school.

Bill saw the school-principal connection clearly when he said, "the principal is viewed as the leader and if we are shown respect from someone high up, then we normally show respect back. Because we respect our principal, we respect our school," and further with his remark, "we don't always want to be at school, but because of the snowball effect, the respect we feel for him, we also feel towards the school." Related to visitors in her school, Tiffany shared, "we wouldn't want to fool around when visitors are here because we don't want to embarrass our school or our principal or our teachers, because we have respect for them."

As a principal I was beginning to learn to celebrate -- celebrating our school, but also celebrating myself. Celebration done with humility. Celebration that regenerated my energy. For me at least, it was always more difficult to celebrate the successes than it was to recognize my shortcomings or those of the school. The attitude of everyone celebrating the school and themselves, was directly linked to me, the principal, celebrating individuals, the school, and myself.

Modeling

May 30, 1996 – 4:10 p.m.: May is the longest month of the year – is there a poem about that? It has been long but exceptional in so many ways.

Technology is moving along at an expensive rate. Had a wonderful hands-on, staff-experts led P.D. day.

Coordinator Assemblies and yard clean up. Commencement was WOW – the best evening I've ever seen.

A student died – Despair, support. A school memorial service - WOW the kids were incredible. Tree planting outside.

A few tensions with grade 12s. It is still here. We've arranged home programming with school support for rest of year.

U of C researcher here all month. Great Drama production. 120 more kids registered than this time last year.

I was very near the end of my principalship in May of 1996. It was however one of the most confusing months I had put in, in five years. That confusion was about a number of things, that internally kept my emotions bouncing between tears and rage, between pride and anger, and between joy and sadness.

Tiffany got at Starratt's (1996) point that "administrators will need to employ imagination in devising creative ways to honor all students," (p. 153) with her comment, "I think our principal thinks students deserve to be rewarded and so she sets these things up." Students were being rewarded, not directly by me, but by significant adults in their school. Not only were students being rewarded, but staff and community members were feeling recognized as part of something very special -- recognition for achievements, recognition for expertise. I had been part of an evening of Commencement that was one of the classiest performances I'd ever seen -- once again largely student orchestrated.

This had to be balanced with a huge tragedy in the school -- the unnecessary death of a student. A tragedy that could have devastated a school, but instead it truly brought us together. The traditional difference between adults and students in schools tended to disappear as everyone realized that pain was being felt by a wide variety of people. I learned something about empowerment, about synergy and about the paradox of leadership. I simply needed to act as a stabilizer, as a value setter and maintainer, and as a key communicator. The rest happened as a result of the actions of many, many people.

Jane, in our conversation, talked about role models. She said, "if you want students to be involved in school . . . we have to see those roles modeled. Our principal is a role model for so many people." Perhaps this month was about role modeling -- role modeling that had been happening for a long time. Role modeling that had occurred in "normal" times and in "crisis" times. Role modeling that students and staff had internalized and put into action. It is often in the unexpected that we as principals gain our greatest rewards.

Rewards

Rob McPhee

From: *Rob McPhee*
To: *Jill McPhee*
Subject: *Celebration*
Date: *Friday, June 14, 1996 3:02 p.m.*

Matt and I head off to Kananaskis today. It looks like a fabulous weekend. But I must tell you about today.

At about 11:30 a.m. Mrs. H. asked me to go out in the hall with her. I walked out and the hall was lined on both sides as far as I could see with cheering kids. Then the Beach Boys started blasting over the intercom -- "Be True to Your School"(Wilson, 1963, track 5). I was overcome. I walked slowly all the way down the hall to the cafeteria, looking at over 1000 wonderful kids and staff. As I went by them they all followed in behind me and we all ended up by the cafeteria. More cheering, etc. Then presentations. Mr. D. presented a banner to represent the fact that the learning resource centre was being renamed after me and signs would go up soon. Then a huge card signed by the whole school. More noise and cheering and I had to speak. It wasn't too great. Two students hosted it all. Then it was over and everyone just stood and cheered -- I stood and waved. Pretty magnificent. A total surprise.

Thought you would like to hear this Jilly -- you who were such an important part of this school. Looking forward to seeing you on the 26th. Love you and safe flight.

That intense link between how students see their school and how they see their principal is ever evident. Two specific references that came up in my conversations are of note. In reference to getting a new principal, Keith said, "we actually cared about who we got for a principal." Perhaps he was saying that he really cared about his school as well. Mangus very nicely drew the two together with his quote, "our principal basically set up the school with the help of other people, of course. Because of the positive environment, we felt the creation was good. Then, you know, maybe the creator is good too."

Hall work

This reflection began in my office. I'd like to conclude it in the hallways. When the students and staff chose to have a celebration for me they chose the hallways. It had felt right having this celebration in the hallway. It had been in the hallways where most of us had met, shared experiences, and become friends. It is in the hallways where often the best and the worst of life in any high school happens. It had been in the hallways where we truly became a community. My conversations with young people almost all referred to their principal and the hallway. Gronn (1983) called corridors "crucial territories in most schools," places where "there is sufficient background noise for talk to be indistinct," and where "greetings are exchanged, contacts are made, . . . where arrangements are made to pursue the matter in quieter, more private surroundings" (p. 6).

I wonder if it is not the hallways of a school that are the territory of the principal and the students. Physically the hallway is the linkage between the outside and the school building, and between all the parts of the school's interior. Clean halls, positive student behavior, and interactions in the hall set the tone for all that happens in the school. You walk through the front door and you can feel what the school is. You are simply in the hallway.

A barrier is always there between the principal and everyone else in the school community. A barrier that is very hard to cross by students, by parents and by staff. The principal can work to lower that barrier, but it will never disappear. Perhaps because it is a barrier that is necessary, one that principals are called to use to the greatest advantage of everyone. The hallways were where I found the barriers were the least noticeable, and where we most nearly met as person to person. The hallways were also where I most often called upon the power of this barrier to be most effective as the principal.

My office, my retreat, was also part of this barrier. I suppose that is partly what all retreats are about. Places that nurture you to function in the world. Places that inspire you to lead. Places where you wrestle with the big issues, so that they appear natural to the world. My interactive world, however, the interactive world of most high school principals is likely to be in the hallways. The sense of aloneness isn't different. The barrier is still there. It remains whether you are in the office or in the hallways. Perhaps the difference is that in your office you may end up being lonely. In the hallways you will always have company if you chose to talk.

Concluding thoughts: Serenity and community

This reflection has brought out further meanings to me. I am struck by the importance of physical spaces in schools, the perceptions of whose spaces these are, and the various ways people routinely behave in these different spaces. And, how important the hallway is as an invitational space for students and principals to come to know one another.

I am also cognizant of the importance of balance -- the need to balance my own personal tensions, the need to create a sense of peace within myself, and the need to model it in both my acceptance of students and my interest in their lives. Bollnow (1989) talked about serenity. He said:

> Serenity creates distance. . . . But this distance is a special kind. It is not a cool contrast but a warm relation in which the other, in particular the younger child, finds himself or herself accepted in a loving and positive manner. So it is absolutely right that such serenity does not just animate a love of life and good temper in others, but in addition creates trust and confidence in their own ability. (p. 56)
>
> Thus serenity is a high virtue and the purest form of atmosphere emanating from the educator. . . . Serenity is granted to the person only if he or she has been able to come to terms and balance with the troubles of life himself or herself. . . . It must grow from the mature human in his or her total being; then this serenity can radiate into education just as it is present in any other human relationship unsought and unsolicited. (p. 57)

It was serenity that Williams (1984) shared in her conversation between the Rabbit and the Skin Horse:

> "What is real?" asked the Rabbit one day, . . .
>
> "It doesn't happen at once," said the Skin Horse. . . . "Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are Real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand." (pp. 6-7)

I wonder, as I have listened to these 12 young people talk about their principal, if serenity is not what underlies everything they were saying. They talked of distance, they talked of warm relations, they talked of acceptance, they talked of modeling, they talked of balance, they talked of trust, they talked of confidence, and they talked of being real. I heard them forcing us to be mature human beings who understand ourselves and what we stand for. Finally, I heard them asking us to listen to them and let them be part of the community called High School. Sergiovanni (1994) put this very nicely:

> Becoming a community of learners, by contrast, is an adventure not only in learning but an adventure in shared leadership and authentic relationships. It requires a certain equality and a certain willingness to know thyself better, to be open to new ideas, and to strive to become. It is an adventure in personal development. (p. 155)

An adventure -- and what an adventure it can be!

CHAPTER 9

POSSIBILITIES

The Gift

At the beginning of this study, I referred to Heidegger who spoke of interpretation as "the working-out of possibilities projected in understanding" (1988, p. 221). This chapter will focus on possibilities -- possibilities for high schools, for young people, for educators, and for further research. Possibilities that flow from our discussion of the three research questions:

> What do high school students value in their school experience?
>
> What do high school students value in their student-adult relationships?
>
> What do high school students value in their principal?

This thesis has been a sharing of what I have discovered as I spoke with young people, read extensively, and reached into my own memories and experiences. I have presented what young people have shared and have interpreted what I have heard. I hope that what preceded has given readers food for thought and reason for action.

What then is the greatest gift this research gives to the community of education -- teachers, administrators, parents, community members, and above all, young people? To answer this question I wish to return to the high school -- that large sprawl of physical, intellectual and emotional energy that permeates the daily lives of so many.

The sights, the sounds, the smells

I enjoy the opportunity to walk through a high school and immerse my senses in the messages awaiting discovery. The long, multi-directional hallways are filled with never-ending banks of lockers, seemingly endless rows of fluorescent lights, and intermingling clusters of young people either coming from or going to, somewhere. These hallways lead to and pass by both mysterious and familiar scenes. There are the intriguing scents of experimental culinary work coming from the foods area, the always familiar smell of cleaning materials and solvents used by custodians, and the almost exotic odor that combines the sweet scent of Polo Sport with the remains of active exercise as you pass the gymnasium.

The visual signs of what is valued are readily obvious -- a Students' Council area advertising upcoming events or honoring photographs of past activities; the trophy case displaying the results of academic, athletic, cultural or citizenship achievements; and the banners or posters representing city championships, celebrating past musical and drama productions, or showing the school's commitment to young people. Readily you hear the wondrous sounds of music emerging through the open doors of the fine arts area, the chatter of students actively huddled around a science lab-bench, or the always familiar, but changing, sound of the bell.

There is an obvious mixing of messages as to what individuals or groups deem important. A bench area near a crossing of halls provides a vantage point for certain groups. Lounges, quiet corners, vending machines, and study locations are staked out by young people as their territories. The library, filled with natural lighting, combines the technology of today and tomorrow with the print of yesterday, the comforts of spontaneous learning with the rigor of intellectual structures. Displays of student work are more visible today than they were a few years ago -- perhaps the result of more talk between different levels of schooling. Endless numbers of garbage cans and re-cycling bins line the common areas and hallways.

The cafeteria displays more exotic smells and tastes as it serves a greater diversity of young people while feeling the competition of the fast food locations frequented by this highly mobile population. The crowds are not always where you expect them -- often the sections of halls where lockers are at a premium are well worn, not physically attractive and near the washrooms. The scent of stale smoke wafts in from outside -- the air combining the rays of sunshine with the cloudiness of smoke gives a certain sense of realness. The high school is the common meeting place of young people. For young people, it is their place of "work." Work, as described by Whyte (1994), "*is* the commonplace and feeds the enormous need in humans for getting things done; but also for money, respect, community, conflict, meaning, and spectacle" (p.19).

The voice of young people

Sherman (1996) told of young children who were "able to verbalize their conceptualizations of the school reality as they understand it" and went on to say that "as educators we have a responsibility to listen to what they have to tell us about school" (p. 73). Later she simply said, "We must listen before it is too late" (p. 84). I have referred to the CEA Report (1995) which said "adult perceptions [of students] may be untrustworthy." Adults were so caught up in their work that "they do not find time to sit down with students and simply talk" (p. 170). Perhaps this is the first gift this research has given me, and hopefully other educators -- the gift of realizing how important it is to take the time to hear the voice of young people in relation to their high schools. Educators either do, or can do this, in many ways. There are structures that facilitate this. We can use site-based decision making, establish homerooms and house systems, administer attitude surveys and questionnaires, encourage active students' councils, extend the times teachers have with students, or creatively use technology to extend our mechanisms to hear the voice of young people. These are all effective, but may very well be screens which block a deeper message I have heard from these young people. Let me provide a personal example.

In Chapter 7, I used a mechanism, a format, to present what I heard young people say about their principals. I used a Principal's Forum. A Principal's Forum is a conversation about something important. I have had some fine experiences working with the concept of a Principal's Forum. About once a month a topic for school wide discussion was chosen. The topics chosen were diverse and originated in many places. In homeroom groupings, students and teachers would start with a general discussion of the issue and then record highlights of the discussion related to specific questions. This was followed by one student from each homeroom coming to the staff dining room where together we shared ideas. I made an overhead of the highlights of their discussion and collected the individual sheets from each homeroom at the end of the session. Feedback from these forums was always shared with the entire school and we tried wherever possible to make students aware of actions that occurred as a result of the particular discussion topic.

Over a number of years we worked through many interesting and relevant issues found in a large urban high school. Both my presentation to new grade 10 students and their parents in June of 1995, and my presentation to all students that fall, were based on a Principal's Forum we had on the topic of "Advice for New High School Students." A letter from the students had gone to the Minister of Education in 1994 following a forum on the roles and responsibilities of students. Work done in the school to increase student retention relied heavily on student feedback on the topic of "Students Completing Courses They Begin." A forum on "Student Safety: In School and Beyond," had resulted from a potentially dangerous situation in the school, and one on "Expectations of Courses" followed attitude survey results that showed all students did not understand what they were to learn in their courses. Finally, two forums on technology, one on extending its use in program delivery and another on technology and ethics, formed the basis of a plan to include an aspect of technology in all high school courses, and of a first attempt at a Technology Code of Ethics for the school.

There is no question that these forums effectively assisted me in understanding the needs and wishes of the student body -- their voice was heard and clearly acted upon. I would like to propose, however, that there can be a certain "detachment" in this or similar processes -- a detachment that comes with what Noddings (1984) referred to as "caring about" (p. 112). She noted that "one might say that we should, occasionally, care about, but we should not suppose that in doing so we are caring for" (p. 112). A Principal's Forum, like a homeroom structure or an opinion survey, may simply be a way to care about students in a detached, impersonal way. Certainly, I heard students express their appreciation for the opportunities given to them in their schools to share what they thought. However, it would be a serious shortcoming if we were not to listen more intently for a deeper message these young people expressed. The more powerful message I heard was that they not only wanted the voice of young people to be heard, but they desperately needed the voices of individuals to be heard and respected. As Jane said, "I felt someone listened to me and it happened." They expected more than a series of techniques; they asked for an inclusive attitude that showed concern and respect for their individuality -- for them personally.

The voices of individuals

Dryden (1995) spoke of "a school within a school within a school. For kids and teachers, a world shrunk to human dimensions" (p. 273). The NASSP Report (1996) indicated "the high school of the 21st century must be much more student-centered and above all much more personalized in programs, support services, and intellectual rigor" (p.

vi). It has always seemed to me that the best measure of my success as a principal would be that all of the 1000 students leaving our school each day felt their voice had been heard and that they had had a satisfying individual contact with at least one person important to them. It is not a matter of this happening for the majority, or the athletes, or the academic elite. It is a matter of it happening for each individual person in the school.

As I come near the end of this conversation with these young people, it would be easy to generalize three or four points that summarize what they have told me. Instead, perhaps the more important gift is to share how each of them has affected me -- affected me enough to alter my future practice to truly include them. Here is some of what I've learned:

from Carolyn -- You wondered about your principal "telling me I needed to study more, when he didn't know anything about me." You reminded me of the pressures of being a good academic student and your need to be accepted when you "only get 75 % on an exam."

from Bill -- I am still struck by your comment about friends "who are still back at high school while I'm at university all by myself." You let me know that it takes only one success, in your case music, to set students up for other successes and make them feel part of a high school.

from Tiffany -- I loved your telling about the special announcement your principal made, "the excuse me for interrupting class, but" type. I always felt guilty doing that! You reminded me that you, like so many others, simply want to "get involved, make friends, be happy, and have fun."

from Mark -- It is your complexity that I have learned to appreciate. I listened to you struggle, as a white male, with issues of racism. I don't understand it all either. You surprised me with your need to have a happy principal with "a smile on his face" to get you through the day.

from Jane -- You talked about both teachers and students each giving their 50%. I think sometimes we adults feel we always give more than our share -- I don't know. Your magnificent description of meeting Shannon in grade 10 tells of the power of friends. Your final line, "I miss high school -- that feeling -- I guess I felt I had control there and made decisions," stays with me.

from Michaela -- Fairness is what it is all about. You asked principals "to treat all the students the same way -- regardless of their marks, their color, their clothes, their anything." Thanks for letting me be part of your learning "about life" that resulted from your coach's phone call while we were talking.

from Mangus -- You told me that high school "is for growing up -- not where you'll achieve your greatest things." I laugh each time I think of you telling how your principal kept control -- "Probably stories. I heard a couple of weird stories about him screaming at this guy. I don't think so, but it was a cool story."

from Jeff -- "No regrets" -- I can learn from that. "Protection" -- I don't completely understand. You lived on the edge but still needed to be respected and cared for. You powerfully reminded me of the influence principals have when you said, "Our school is the least violent probably" and then related this to your respect for the principal whom you knew and always saw.

from Keith -- I hear it over and over again in my head, "the schools won't take you if you have bad grades. It doesn't matter how big a star you are." Or I hear you telling me that you "just lose it, you don't know why, but you just lose it," when you hear a racial slur. You shared a powerful message to always "follow your dream."

from Rebecca -- You have helped me see the teenage years as a time to be respected simply for what they are, not for what they may lead to. I learned a lot from your description of the teacher who forced you to confront the reason for a violent racial incident. I will remember, "We share minds. When you're 17 you share one communal mind." I'll also remember not to treat you the same as everyone else.

from Hans -- Your absolute intrigue with adults made me stop and think about what I do. You told me that having adults in school to talk to, was "like having an encyclopedia on your lap all the time." A compliment and a challenging responsibility. I heard your need for us to be "nice guys, with a sense of humor -- but strict too."

from Victoria -- I learned that "school was like a second home -- not just a place to learn, but a place of friendship, of growing up." You reminded me of your own wisdom and abilities when you said, "if there is a problem, he [principal] tries to get students together to help solve the problem." You're right, we don't have to do it all ourselves.

Each of these 12 young people, like each of the 1000 students in a high school, daily have messages for us to hear. Is our practice not enriched by attaching ourselves to these needs? Are our lives not enriched by our relationships with these young people? Doesn't listening to and knowing these young people, help us confidently determine what is important in our work as educators? **This, I believe is the greatest gift this study gives to the community of education -- the gift of realizing how important it is to take the time to hear the voices of individual young people, and then to adjust our practice based on this learning.**

A memory

I'd like to tell a story -- a story that tells of the collective actions of many people towards me. Actions that made me wonder and appreciate the small, real, daily interactions that occurred between others and me, which perhaps made this story possible to tell. Actions too that point out the confidence we show, when we are working within relationships with others.

The Speech

Good evening Graduates, Parents, Staff and Guests. Trustee Cann, thank you for joining us tonight. This will be the final time I have the opportunity to address this graduating class of 1996.

I think for the first time, it really hit me that I was leaving. Standing in front of 1500 graduates and guests at the Jubilee Auditorium, I knew I had to complete this speech. The speech was prepared, the words would be right, I had done this many times before.

It started in my stomach, it moved up through my chest and into my throat. From the opposite direction it moved down towards my eyes. I was choked up, in public, at the beginning of what I had to share. Nothing came from my mouth, nothing came from *anywhere. The place was completely silent, quiet. It seemed like a long time. I looked up, shared a shy smile, and carried on.*

This evening however, instead of focusing on tomorrow, I would like to think about yesterday and today. Yesterday will set so much of the tone for tomorrow. Today is what living is all about.

This part of my speech was light, it was real, and it had been fun writing. I wanted each of the graduates to realize that my memories of the past three years were memories of them as people -- people who had done so much and shared with so many. As I spoke, the graduates chuckled, I knew they were with me. They, like I, knew that what I was saying included everyone of them.

How many of you have worked to balance that confusing chemical equation; felt real empathy while you studied Romeo and Juliet; struggled over a long mathematical problem and finally got it; tried to publicly use your new skills of Japanese, German, French or Spanish; or dissected the perfect pig in biology?

How many of you have produced the perfect set in volleyball, traveled with a school group to Europe, acted as a big brother or sister to a new grade ten, produced a wonderful piece of art to display in the school, or put hours into an extensive science research project?

And finally how many of you have rolled in the mud during mud volleyball, dressed to the nines during Touch of Class, developed a special friendship that will last a life time, or supported someone dear to you during a time of crisis?

I was having a good time. Everything that had made up our relationships over the past three years was openly out there and on display. It had not always been easy, or even positive. It had, however, been real. Even the week previous I had made a very tough decision that affected several members of this graduating class. They had been furious with me.

Then I moved my words, out of the memories and into today.

Somewhere between the memories of yesterday and the dreams of tomorrow lies today -- the present -- the day to day stuff. The major music hero of my generation, John Lennon, wrote a wonderful song for someone of your generation, his son. The song is called "Beautiful Boy" (1980, track 19). One line I particularly like in this song goes like this, "Life is what happens to you while you're busy making other plans."

I think he was referring here to what happens each day as we live our lives. . . . Life is not made up of a lot of big stuff -- generally it is a lot of little things, done with a lot of love, that produces what we call life.

It was coming back – that feeling of being overtaken by something much greater than me. It can't happen, I am not finished. I lifted my head, I looked out, through the light, into the darkness. It was all a blur, but I could sense it was friendly. What I mostly wanted to say I hadn't said yet. I lowered my voice, my way of saying to both them and to me, "I am ready and I have something important to say." They recognized both the voice and the message.

I want to finish off by saying that I am very proud of each of you for many, many reasons. I hope that you too are proud of yourselves. It does not matter who you are, what you have done, where you are going, or what you will do. You are each special, you are each worth loving, you can each love, and you each have value for no other reason than that you are a human being. That is the bottom line. I hope that each day, as you live your life, you will take time to celebrate who you are, show some love to yourself, and then share that love with others.

Whew! I had said it. I looked out, they weren't smirking, they weren't restless, they were listening and something in the air said they too were feeling. I wanted to tell each of them that I loved them and cared for them a great deal. I had thought about it, but decided not to. Telling 400 graduates that you love them didn't seem appropriate or real. Even though I feel the most important thing I can do each day is tell my own children that I love them, somehow I had to hope that through my actions, each of these graduates had come to know that I thought they were special and that I did love and care for them. I then turned to their parents.

And to you parents out there -- I ask you to take the time tonight to let your wonderful son or daughter know that you too love them, that they are incredibly important to you, and no matter what they do, they are your child. Please don't do it just tonight, do it every day of their life.

Had I pushed beyond where I had the right to push? Was I preaching? Once again I could tell that I had gotten away with it. My voice had quivered a bit as I had spoken. I had hoped that the love that I have for my three children, which had always been so much part of why I did what I did at work, could form the basis of a communal bond between these parents and me. We each were one because of our humanness.

Good-bye to each of you, from the man who has been honored with being a friend and a principal to you. You are mighty wonderful people.

The energy fell through my body, pouring out of my feet. It was hot, it was bright, it was dark, it was noisy. I wanted more than anything to get off the stage, out of the light and into the dark. I placed my speech in my pocket, moved out from behind the podium and walked towards the steps. It was so noisy. Then I looked up.

A flood of blue – hats and gowns – they were all standing up in the middle of the auditorium. Their faces were animated – I could feel, but not really see. They were *cheering, hands were raised, voices were calling. I didn't know what to do. My first thought was that this is not how this is supposed to feel. I didn't like it, I felt unworthy. This was to be their evening, not mine. A standing ovation and all I wanted to do was disappear.*

But then. . . moving back towards the middle of the stage I started to smile. I smiled simply because I was happy, I was overcome, and I was being honored. I wanted to be invisible, but instead I felt transparent. I felt each eye could see right through me. At that moment, however, it felt right to be seen through. I didn't feel a need to hide anything. I didn't feel confident, but I felt accepted. I raised my hand and waved. That didn't feel right either. On TV this always looked so powerful. Tonight had nothing to do with power. I felt a bond of true humanity with these kids.

It lasted, I don't know how long. A little child, dressed up in a suit, wondering what life is all about. That was me. Moving off the stage, down the steps, I collapsed into my chair. Soon I had to get back on the stage. It was time to get myself together again.

Later that night, in the calm of my family room I started to wonder. What had happened tonight? What did it all mean? I remembered some comments I'd heard after the ceremony:

> A grandfather of one graduate told his daughter who told me, "Your friend sure must be popular with the kids. They gave him a standing ovation."
>
> A visitor, with no children in the school, attributed the students' response to my reference to John Lennon. She said, "It brought tears to my eyes."
>
> A staff member commenting on the evening, attributed the students' actions to the fact that I had presented a wonderful speech.
>
> My daughter, in grade 11 and who observed the event, said, "You know Dad, it meant a lot to them, to stand up and say thank-you to you."
>
> One graduate gave me a hug and said, "Thank you," while another group of six insisted that I be part of their graduation photograph.

Today, I wonder if the meaning was not simply about knowing these young people. The story in the first chapter of my first assembly with young people pointed out the anxiety one feels when you can't "read the crowd." Though there was, and always will be, some uncertainty within me, this story was different. It was different because of the sharing of voices that had occurred over a period of three years. This sharing had at times been the more formal work of hearing the voice of students, but mostly it had been the informal daily sharing of individual, personal voices that carried with them needs, desires and dreams.

The kid inside

There's a kid inside
And I have him with me always
There's a kid inside
Walking down old high school hallways
There's a kid inside
At a desk, at a dance, in the halls, in the showers
There's a kid inside
To this very day.
(Carnelia, 1982, track 15)

As I anticipate a future, a future where the voices of young people are readily heard in high schools, I have also come to both accept and celebrate my personal past. The song above has another line that reads, "To a time and place I couldn't forget if I tried" (Carnelia, 1982, track 15). Part of the message I heard from these young people was a request to remember what it was like being a teenager -- to go back to the time and place of being a high school student. When I do this, I have to admit some of it really hurts, some of it I don't want to remember. On the other hand, much of it I do remember with fondness, happiness, and certainly a sense of nostalgia for what seemed like a simpler time and place. Noddings (1984) wrote:

> I have a picture of those moments in which I was cared for and in which I cared, and I may reach toward this memory and guide my conduct by it if I wish to do so. (p. 80)

I can picture moments when I was cared for in high school. I remember a math teacher who magically made mathematics simple. I remember a chemistry teacher who it seemed spent all her free time giving us the opportunities to be part of wonderful operettas. I remember the tuna and egg sandwiches we had late Thursday afternoons as an English teacher helped us produce yet another school newspaper. I remember a train trip across the country where our principal and his wife allowed us to be teenagers. These memories all awaken the kid inside me; a kid who now is an adult. An adult who today, can make these same differences for young people, if I wish to do so.

I then think of a line from Michael's (1996) novel -- "The memories we elude catch up to us, overtake us like a shadow. A truth appears suddenly in the middle of a thought, a hair on a lens" (p. 213). Talking with these young people has rekindled a number of memories which either have eluded me, or I them. The memory of desperately wanting to play football, but being afraid to go out to practice. The memory of a girlfriend paying too much attention to a friend of mine. The memory of knowing my whole opportunity for university rested on passing French. The memory of losing in a Students' Union election. These memories resurface the "kid inside." They have the potential to remind me to see behind the faces of students, to listen more carefully, and to treat situations more compassionately. They have the potential to keep me open to possibilities and to nurture my personal sense of serenity -- serenity, which can lead me to view the lives of today's young people more empathically and realistically. The choice is mine, as it is of all educators. Yes, we will see the world of high schools and young people differently than they do. We are different people! However, the chance that everyday affords us to see the world as young people see it, or as we once did, offers enriched opportunities for everyone. It is the action of giving ourselves up to understanding the realities and voices of others -- in this case those of young people in our high schools. This was said so well by Mitchell (1947):

> He [the school-master] wondered when the fact that she [the teacher] was dealing with bits of human being would become evident to her; he wondered when she would show the slightest spark of understanding and leave the narrow confines of herself. (p. 85)

Awakening

"Questioning in a real way, we start, by all the lights of the poetic tradition, *to awaken*" (Whyte, 1994, p. 24). Part of wakening is seeing the endless possibilities there are around us. Through this study I have begun to understand the possibilities for further awakenings. Cooper (1997) wrote that "narrative inquiry is a process of searching without a clearly defined ending because the answers it finds often open to larger possibilities" (p. 12). Similarly Leonard (1994) stated "it is a tenet of this kind of research that there can always be another, deeper and perhaps more persuasive, interpretation of a phenomenon" (p. 61). Both of these thoughts lead me to finish this work with a sharing of possibilities -- possibilities for the young people with whom I have worked; and possibilities for future questioning, awakenings, and further possibilities through research.

Possibilities -- for young people

A major benefit of this work was my getting to know 12 young people. During our last conversation we talked of their futures, or at least the possibilities of their futures. For some, much had changed over the six month period we had worked together, for others not. I would like to share their possibilities for the future.

Victoria completed her first year of Engineering and is awaiting approval to enter a specialty in Environmental Engineering.

Carolyn plans to take only morning classes during her grade 12 year, and work in the afternoons. Following this she wants to be a teacher.

Bill completed his first year of university but will not return. He is working in an ice-cream shop for the summer and has enrolled in a computer course at a community college.

Tiffany made the Team Alberta softball team and will be playing at the Canada Summer Games. She's taking summer school as a result of a "conflict with her English teacher" and will complete grade 12 next year.

Mark is working as a laborer full-time, putting in really long days. The early start and the late finish give him little time or energy for much else.

Jane is doing her practical nursing courses most of the summer and will go on to second year nursing in the fall. She can't imagine missing out on the learning of her past year.

Michaela went into her Math 30 diploma exam with an 80%. She has been accepted into a combined Education and Physical Education program at university. She's still a bit uncertain about this.

Mangus continues to work two or three very part-time jobs, and lives on his own in a basement suite. He has decided it is "time to make a future" and is enrolling at A.V.C. in the fall to get a number of grade 11 and 12 courses.

Hans completed his first year of university (all but Japanese). He's not going to go back. Instead he plans to take a 3-D animation course out of the province.

Jeff is working in one of his dad's businesses. He dropped Chemistry 30 this winter and is doing it at summer school. He will continue working in the fall. He doesn't feel like going to university.

Keith is going to play Junior football with the Huskies. He wants to get a job or maybe go back to high school if he doesn't pass English.

Rebecca is taking the year off to work, to travel, and to improve her portfolio. She will likely attend art classes at a community college which hopefully will help her gain entry to the Alberta School of Art.

Twelve young people, with lots of hope and lots of possibilities. I wish the best for each of them.

Possibilities -- for research

How would I continue this research? What larger possibilities have been opened?

Some that seem appealing to me are:

- All of the young people I spoke with shared their perspectives from a particular time and place. It might be useful to work with a smaller group over a three year period. Are there significant differences or changes in the perceptions of young people from grade 10 to grade 12? Do these vary with males or females?
- I got to know 12 young people relatively well. Earlier in the process it was suggested that I do some in-depth work with only two or three young people. These young people's lives are amazingly complex. Perhaps I have just touched the surface.
- Do males and females experience high school significantly differently? Would an analysis of data separating males and females give further insights?
- A look back at my data from these young people has caused me to think about why there is so much greater diversity amongst the males than the females. Is this a function of the students I chose, is it a function of me as a researcher, or is it representative of what we see in high schools?
- Issues of student leadership came up throughout this study. There is a huge area that relates to student influence, formal and informal structures, real or fringe involvement in school issues, and actual student influence over school practices and operations. Does a strong Students' Council ensure that students feel heard? Or is it even related?

- Another aspect of leadership is who consider themselves to be leaders in schools. Nearly all of these 12 young people somewhere in their conversations indicated their involvement in some sort of leadership within their schools. This surprised me because it was not my feeling when I chose them. Are we underestimating the opportunities available in high schools for young people to show leadership?

- I did this work entirely through individual conversations. I considered bringing groups together, but chose not to. I was concerned about issues of confidentiality and anonymity, especially on particular topics we discussed. Would different ideas come from a study that only met young people in group situations?

- Earlier I noted that English teachers tended to be praised and criticized the most by students I worked with. It seemed that the English classroom was a place where they expected a connection to be made between subject matter and human needs or feelings. A look at English classrooms and English teachers, from the perspectives of students, could prove very valuable.

- These young people identified some exceptional teachers. A look at exceptional teaching practice, based upon a sample of teachers identified as exceptional by teenagers, could open exciting possibilities.

The list could go on -- I suppose based on the unique interests we each bring to our work.

Becoming Ourselves

Earlier I shared Merton's (1979) purpose for education as showing "a person how to define himself [herself] authentically and spontaneously in relation to his [her] world" (p. 12). It is important to me as an educator, a principal, a father, and a student that we do whatever possible to assist young people in defining their authentic selves. This is a gift they can hold forever. Our willingness, as adults, to listen to what each of them has to say, is part of this. The rewards will come when we hear young people say, "I am happy with who I have become," or that "our high school experience has paved the path, and made us aware of the successes available to us." We will see, the awakening of possibilities, in each of them.

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APPENDIX A

High schools: What students value
Research project

My name is Rob McPhee and I am presently working on my PhD at the University of Alberta in the Department of Educational Policy Studies. Through my experience as an educator I have learned that there is much to learn from students with whom I have worked. In this piece of research I want to find out more about three specific questions.

1. What do high school students value in their school experience?
2. What do high school students value in their student-adult relationships?
3. What do high school students value in their principal?

I believe that you can help me. You are or have been a high school student and I want to hear your stories. Your perspectives are valuable and unique. I am asking that we get together for two, one hour conversations. Attached to this sheet are some of the questions we might talk about. However, what you say will probably influence what we talk about, more than these questions will. Each of our conversations will be recorded, the contents will be typed up and I will give you a copy. These will all be dealt with confidentially. I would also like to involve you later in the research, as I begin to pull out themes that relate to what you and other students tell me.

Your participation is completely voluntary. I hope you will enjoy this opportunity to talk and share your insights. However, at any point you feel you must withdraw your participation I would certainly respect that.

This research project has been approved by the ethics committee of the University of Alberta's Department of Educational Policy Studies.

Please complete the consent form attached to this sheet and return it to me when we next get together. If you are under 18 years of age, would you please have your parents sign it as well. I would also ask that you write down in not more than five sentences what you think best describes you as a high school student. Be creative -- you are writing about a special person!

My phone number is 462-3718. If you or your parents have any questions please call me.

Thanks for your participation.

Rob McPhee

High schools: What students value

Conversation starters

Time: One hour

What do high school students value in their school experience?

1. Please tell me about your experiences of high school. It is your perspectives and stories which are important to me. Use this opportunity to share whatever is important or valuable to you. Your experiences and stories can help me become more informed and understanding of high schools and schooling in general.

Some things you might talk about:

courses
student leadership
report cards
extra curricular
student behavior
fine arts
academic learning
athletics
achievements
friendships
student activities
career planning
counseling services
facilities
preparation beyond H.S.
involvement
technology
school community

What do high school students value in their student-adult relationships?

2. Please tell me a bit about the significant adults in your high school experience.

Things you might talk about:

Why they are significant.
Descriptions of adults and what they have done.
Personal stories of significant experiences, interactions, or relationships.
What you learn from these people.

What do high school students value in their principal?

3. What roles did/does your principal play in your high school experience. How is your principal significant to you? Please share specific examples and stories from your experiences -- those stories you might share with your friends and family.

General

4. What makes the relationships you have with adults in school different from other relationships you have with adults? Please be as specific as possible.

APPENDIX B

High schools: What students value
Consent form

I ____________________________________ volunteer to participate in this research project. I understand that my participation is completely voluntary and that I can withdraw at any point if necessary. I also know that all information provided will be considered confidential and the source will be anonymous.

Student's Signature:______________________________ Date:__________________

Parent's Signature (only if student is under 18 years old)

____

Please, in not more than five sentences, write what best describes you as a high school student. Thanks.

____

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APPENDIX C

Conversation schedule

Conversation One: One hour

What do high school students value in their school experience?

1. Please tell me about your experiences of high school. It is your perspectives and stories which are important to me. Use this opportunity to share whatever is important or valuable to you. Your experiences and stories can help me become more informed and understanding of high schools and schooling in general.

Possible Probes related to particular stories or events:

courses
student leadership
report cards
extra curricular
student behavior
fine arts
academic learning
athletics
achievements
friendships
student activities
career planning
counseling services
facilities
preparation beyond H.S.
involvement
technology
school community

What do high school students value in their student-adult relationships?

2. Please tell me a bit about the significant adults in your high school experience.

General Probes related to:

Why they are significant.
Descriptions of adults and what they have done.
Personal stories of significant experiences, interactions, or relationships.
What you learn from these people.

Specific Probes (story focused) related to responses of General Probes. Adults who:

acknowledge students
respects students
understand student's life
have a sense of humor
value students
are thoughtful
walk their talk
teach you a lot
involve students in decisions
are living examples
provide a sense of hope
provide a special atmosphere
help students develop a sense of discipline
truly belong to students
share what they value in life
make every situation one of learning
challenge students to question and learn from these questions

What do high school students value in their principal?

3. What roles did/does your principal play in your high school experience. How is your principal significant to you? Please share specific examples and stories from your experiences. Those stories you might share with your friends and family.

General Probes related to:

- visibility
- personal qualities
- student learning
- creativity, planning
- knows students
- involvement in student activities
- student involvement
- sets behavior expectations
- respect of staff
- knows about technology
- sets school tone
- respect for student opinions
- maintains safety
- community visibility
- shows real caring

General

4. What makes the relationships you have with adults in school different from other relationships you have with adults? Please be as specific as possible.

Conversation Two: One hour

This would flow from the first conversation and include issues raised, specifics found in the transcripts, and opportunities for further examples or specifics related to previous responses. Attempts would be made to involve students in the process of determining major themes or insights from conversations and stories/examples that reflect these.

APPENDIX D

Conversation two guide

Name ______________________________

Date of next Conversation _______________ **Time** ____________________

Location __________________

Thanks for your participation in our last conversation. Here is a copy of the transcript of the conversation. When you are reading this over please keep in mind:

1. This is a record of our spoken language. Don't worry if it doesn't sound too good. It is the main ideas that are important.
2. This transcript is confidential. I ask that you do not share it with anyone. Thanks for your help.
3. Any ideas that I use in my research will not include your name or anything that can trace the comment back to you.

For our next conversation will you please.

1. Read over the transcript and ensure that you think it is accurate. Write on it as you wish. I'll collect it from you after the conversation.
2. Be prepared to comment on the following:
3. Identify what you think are the three most important things you have told me in our conversations.
4. I will not use your name in my research. If I were to identify you with an imaginary name, what name would you like?

Thanks for your help. Mr. McPhee (462-3718)